What Price Art?

by Lee A. Daniels

Two exhibitions of recent works by Romare Bearden opened this fall in New York City and Detroit. The shows’ acclaim and popularity at both the Cordier & Ekstrom Gallery in Manhattan and at the Detroit Art Institute (see Calendar) showed once again not just the power of Bearden’s artistic vision but the reach of his commercial appeal as well.

“His work is in very strong demand,” said Arne Ekstrom, co-owner of the gallery that has represented Bearden since the late 1950s. “You open the gallery for the day, and if you leave you can hardly get back in the door by lunch.”

The Bearden exhibitions followed by just two months the Seattle Art Museum’s Jacob Lawrence retrospective, which opened to wide public notice and critical hosannas. The retrospective, encompassing 149 of Lawrence’s paintings, moved in September to the Oakland Art Museum, in Oakland, California, the second of a six-city tour that will end late next year.

And both followed another critical event in recent art history. When the revised third edition of H. W. Janson’s History of Art was published last April, this basic college text on great paintings and sculpture included, for the first time, the work of two black American painters: Henry O. Tanner (1859–1937), who emigrated to Paris in order to find an environment more accepting of the notion that a black man could be a painter; and, perhaps even more important, William T. Williams, a 42-year-old Yale-trained artist who lives and teaches in New York.

Janson describes Williams as a painter of “extremely sophisticated technique,” a lyrical Expressionist whose work “uses color and abstraction to capture the transition from the physical to the spiritual world, an evanescent memory of the artist’s African past.”

As welcome and deserved as this acclaim is for each of these artists, the very fact that it is so noteworthy underscores the predicament of Afro-American art: It remains the stepchild of the art world—largely ignored by the network of museums, major galleries, auction houses, art journals, critics and collectors, both individual and corporate, that significantly influence the public appreciation of, and the market for, art.

“The number of black American artists and the quality of their work is extraordinary,” said Mary Schmidt Campbell, executive director of the Studio Museum in Harlem. “But their presence in the art marketplace and their impact on the marketplace are negligible.

“Even the better-known black artists fetch relatively small sums in comparison to their white peers,” said Richard Clarke, president of Richard Clarke Associates, a New York-based executive recruiting firm, and a major collector in the field. “They are in demand within a very small circle, and their buyers, by and large, aren’t major collectors. Afro-American art is still in the closet.”

This lack of exposure has a doubly negative impact on Afro-American artists, according to Barry Gaither, director of the Museum of the National Center for Afro-American Artists, in Boston. And because museums and galleries play major roles in establishing the artistic worth of a work of art, their downplaying of Afro-American art in turn affects its market value.

The works of significant black American artists—whether historical figures such as Tanner or contemporary ones such as Bearden—usually sell for substantially less in the marketplace than works by white artists of equal or lesser talent and accomplishment.

Of course, as with any market, the art market thrives on limitation. Many white artists whose works merit attention are also ignored.

Yet, according to the score of curators, gallery owners, art dealers, collectors, and artists interviewed recently, the “ghetto-ization” of Afro-American art is something different, a result of cultural ignorance, obtuseness and the racism of the white art world.

“What the commercial art world has done,” said Joe Overstreet, an artist and director of the Kenkeleba Gallery on Manhattan’s Lower East Side, “is block off a section of art and say, ‘This is worthy.’ That is a tiny corner of the real world of art, and they let very few black artists in.”

One might not think that such an invidious separation could take hold in the visual arts, perhaps the most individualistic of all the creative arts. But in fact, said Campbell, too much of the art world remains mired in the racism that drove Tanner to Europe in the late 1800s and fashioned a rigid code of segregation in the 1920s, in response to the emergence of the first substantial group of Afro-American artists. It is, she said, “one of the most segregated corners of American life.”

The one notable exception is the significant support of Afro-American art by a relatively few corporations.

For example, the Lawrence retrospective is being partially funded by
IBM. And Chesebrough-Pond’s, Inc. is cosponsoring the “Sharing Traditions” exhibit, which opened last year and will tour 15 cities by mid-1988. The show, which was developed by the Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum of American Art, features the works of five nineteenth-century black artists—Henry O. Tanner, Joshua Johnson, Edmonia Lewis, Edward Bannister and Robert Scott Duncanson.

Chesebrough-Pond’s has focused on outreach programs for the exhibit, “to spread the knowledge of the work in the community and in the classroom,” said Vivian Warfield, the company’s director of community affairs.

Others interviewed mentioned Philip Morris and General Foods Corporation as among those companies notable for supporting Afro-American art.

One corporate executive, who asked not to be identified, explained the paucity of corporations involved in these efforts by saying, “The corporate sector response to Afro-American art isn’t any less developed than that of the general art world. Neither has been educated to regard black artists with respect.”

Peg Alston, a Manhattan-based art dealer, said that, because whites have valued so-called High Art—the painting and sculpture that require a measure of training and education—as one of the purest expressions of all that it means to be a civilized human being, many of them have “found it very difficult to acknowledge that blacks can create works of profound beauty and meaning.”

Elizabeth Harris, co-owner of the Harris Brown Gallery in Boston, which specializes in Afro-American art, said that much of that attitude stems from the way art is taught in the United States and Europe. “By and large,
William T. Williams (below) has some firm views about “the merchandising of culture.” He says he tries to “make an honest product and offer it for sale at reasonable prices” and that he undervalues his work because he wants to be accessible.

Williams holds his 1984 oil, A Note to Marcel Proust, which has been exhibited often, once in the People’s Republic of China.
those involved in the art world have studied the traditional art texts, which pay little, if any, attention to black American artists. Thus, most art students graduate without being aware of the quality and diversity of styles of the work of black artists. There are curators of major museums who would be hard pressed to list the names of ten black artists.”

This ignorance of Afro-American culture directly influences the aesthetic and financial appreciation of Afro-American art, according to Adolphus Ealey, owner of Washington's Barnett-Aden collection. “It’s not just the technical elements of the art that make a work valuable, it’s the cultural background from which it springs,” Ealey asserted. “The cultural dimension gives the work a raison d’estre and provides the meaning it has for all our lives.” It stands to reason, then, that if the cultural dimension of the work isn’t understood or valued, the work itself will be little valued in aesthetic or financial terms.

And since Afro-American art is rarely sold or auctioned for substantial prices, the established mechanism by which prices in the art world are set doesn’t function well, nor does the work appreciate in value. By contrast, Ealey said, the art market is often manipulated by gallery owners and others to “set” a market price for the works of a new, favored, white artist or to raise the going market value of an established artist.

This is sometimes done by the “false” buying of art works at the opening of a gallery exhibition, in which works are marked as sold when they are actually unbought, or bought at a price lower than the one quoted. And it is done through “false bidders” at art auctions whose purpose is to push the bidding for certain works up to pre-set levels.

As a result, a price for the works of the artist in question gets established at a certain level or gets raised to a higher one. Those who own his works can then donate them to mu-

The Harris Brown Gallery, founded in 1984, is “affiliated with” 21 Afro-American artists. Elizabeth Harris uses that term to express her gallery’s relationship with them: promoting, showing and selling their work, arranging other exhibit opportunities, tuning in on grant and fellowship news. She distinguishes these roles from that of a private dealer, who often works from his home, incurs few costs for showing and promoting, and takes, accordingly, a smaller piece of the sale pie. Among the artists the gallery represents is Oliver Jackson, whose untitled wood and mixed media sculpture is shown at left. Its $7,500 price is suitable, Harris says, for an “established” artist who was included in the prestigious Whitney biennial, in 1983.

Bars on the Landscape #1, a 1986 painted steel and brass piece by John Scott, is awaiting a buyer, at $4,000. Scott is cited in Art News’ newest poll as one of 17 artists that critics are watching.
seums and take fatter tax write-offs. And the artist moves into the coveted museum category, which solidifies his stature as a noteworthy artist.

Lowery S. Sims, associate curator of twentieth-century art at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, wrote recently that the last 20 years have produced a great surge in both the number of people who have the wherewithal to buy art and in the number of working artists. But the latter has grown far more than the former, leading to “an incredible supply of art” that far surpasses the demand.

The upshot, says Sims, whose position makes her one of the top black museum officials in the country, is that “the consumption of art has become more of a game of creating and discovering successive crops of new and energetic talents to be supported” by the relatively small art-collecting public. “The fallout from this disparity,” Sims adds, “is that the hunger for novelty—engendered by avant-gardist postures—has been exacerbated by an emphasis on investment in the activity of art consumption.”

In other words, for a growing number of the art-buying public, art has become a commodity, to be acquired and sold primarily for its monetary value. So, manipulation of the sort Ealey and Sims mentioned can be viewed as simply an inevitable by-product of the superheated environment of today’s art market. But that kind of commercial activity is foreign to Afro-American art. Consequently, works by black artists have had little attraction for those private and corporate collectors who buy art with an eye on the ledger—looking for the appreciation potential that will make its later sale or donation profitable.

Suzanne Randolph, a partner in Randolph & Tate Associates, a New York-based art advisory firm, said the “necessity” of hype in the art marketplace has sharply distorted the influence of “social connections” in its operations. She says that this development has transformed the “social dimension” of the art marketplace and the role of major art galleries.

“Much of why certain white artists become ‘hot’ has to do with social connections,” she remarked. “Often, curators and collectors want to know the artist, and how they regard the artist as a person influences their choosing to promote or buy his work. It becomes a very social thing—it’s lunch, dinner, breakfast, cocktail parties, whatever it takes to promote the work. If you’re a gallery owner, you’ve got to feel comfortable operating in that way, and you’ve got to have artists who feel comfortable in that role as well.” And, it might be said, clients who are as comfortable with the artist as with his art.

As one might suspect, this social dimension of the art marketplace scarcely encourages white-owned galleries to handle black artists, particularly since the costs of operating a gallery have risen dramatically in recent years. So, black artists are very clearly at a disadvantage in a marketplace where the price tag on their work is too often heavily dependent on the “social comfort” of those who help establish market value. And yet, many black artists, while acknowledging the financial significance of commercial success, look askance at the commercial marketplace.

Houston Conwill, whose works have appeared in a number of exhibitions and museums and who recently returned from a year abroad under a Prix de Rome fellowship, said that “the marketplace, where the price of your work gets raised or lowered arbitrarily, has nothing to do with an artist’s honest expression of his vision.” Conwill distinguished the commercial marketplace from the “support system” of foundations, government arts councils and some museums and galleries whose patronage helps those artists “trying to give visible form to the ineffable, the unfathomable, the unarticulatable.”
Houston Conwill shuns the marketplace—he has no agent. Still, New York City has commissioned a wall mural, and his new Passion of St. Matthew (left) will be in a 1987 show in Louisville. Above, the artist beside Louisville, valued at $8,000—part of his 1983 Cakewalk group.

William T. Williams agreed. Standing in his lower Manhattan studio surrounded by his paintings, he said, "You choose not to let your life revolve around the merchandising of oneself and one's work. It's not why I started making art, nor why I continue painting and drawing."

Williams, a professor of art at the City University of New York, said his chief art-related activities are teaching and working in his studio seven hours a day. "My job as an artist is to go to the studio every day and make art, to realize that the ultimate power of the creating is in my hands. I'm certainly not saying that artists shouldn't be properly compensated for their work. But I remember the advice a friend of mine who is a curator gave to me a long time ago. He said that great art isn't made at cocktail parties."

That Afro-American art should be so little valued in the same marketplace that clearly places great value on African art seems at first glance incongruous. But that paradox is readily understandable, according to Merton D. Simpson, one of the world's top dealers in African art and himself a painter whose work has been shown in numerous solo exhibitions and collections of works of Afro-American artists.

Simpson pointed out that the European colonization of Africa exposed aesthetes and artists there to the power and beauty of the various African art forms—an attraction reflected in the re-interpretation of those forms by Picasso and other artists in the early 1900s.

Eric Robertson, another leading African art dealer, said that, as a consequence, there's long been a broad multi-continental network of dealers, galleries, art journals, collectors and museums devoted to virtually every facet of African art, from sculpture to jewelry to textiles to ceramics. "It's a sphere of activity that completely dwarfs that in Afro-American art," said Robertson. "There's no comparison."

Nonetheless, Robertson and others said that two developments in the last 20 years—one on each side of the supply-demand equation—have broadened the "reach" of Afro-American art and laid the foundation for significant commercial growth. One is the growth in the number of black American artists whose training and familiarity with the technical demands and possibilities of the craft is as extensive as that of their white peers. The other is the growth of the black middle class—which, at first glance, at least, would seem to be a "natural" market for the works of Afro-American artists.

Harris said that sales at her Boston gallery are about evenly spread between blacks and whites, but that many of the black buyers are under 40 and are buying their first piece of fine art. Many feel that this group—young blacks with middle-class incomes—will provide the acquisitive force that will help move Afro-American art to its rightful place in the commercial art market.

In part, said Overstreet, the growing interest in Afro-American art among blacks stems from the flowering of black activism in the 1960s, which stimulated in its wake an ongoing racial curiosity and pride among many blacks.

Further, the numerical growth of the black middle class is important because two of the significant characteristics of a bourgeoisie are its acquisitiveness and its interest in art. Thus, as middle-class blacks acquire more assets and achieve greater financial security, said Harris, "aesthetic con-
Cases in Point

The Studio Museum in Harlem is opening a new exhibition this fall (see Calendar), featuring the works of sculptor Meta Warrick Fuller, photographer James Van Der Zee and painters Aaron Douglas, Palmer Hayden and William H. Johnson. In her introduction to the exhibition catalogue, Mary Schmidt Campbell, director of the museum, has this to say about how these artists of the Harlem Renaissance have fared in the marketplace—and why.

The exhibition is ambitious. In providing a forum for the works, it seeks to restore some critical balance to the reputations of the Harlem Renaissance artists and to consider the urgent issues of cultural identity and social and political tensions so often implicit in their images. These tensions, which percolated beneath the shimmering surface of the Jazz Age, were evident in the very manner in which the Harlem Renaissance artists were patronized, exhibited, and presented to the American public.

What this exhibition makes painfully evident is that the Harlem Renaissance artists were the victims of a segregated culture, a culture that separated its artists as emphatically as it segregated its public schools. For the most part, the artists were represented by a white philanthropy, The Harmon Foundation, which held national competitions exclusively for black artists. After it halted its programs in the 1950s, private support for the artists virtually disappeared.

In organizing “Harlem Renaissance,” it was all too clear that, except for the few black colleges that had the foresight to collect the works of black artists and the National Museum of American Art, which was given the works of William H. Johnson after the Renaissance, the bulk of these artists’ works remained in the hands of their families and friends. Until the late 1960s, when the Civil Rights Movement aggressively resurrected the cultural artifacts of the African-American past, their art usually had not been documented or exhibited since the time of the Renaissance.

—M.S.C.

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Fresh off the press, Collecting Black Americana, by Dawn E. Reno (Crown, 1986) includes in its wide-ranging coverage some useful clues to the price ranges for Afro-American art. She offers these benchmarks, based on the going prices for four well-known artists.

Edward M. Bannister: “Recent prices...range from the lower thousands to the mid and upper teens...His best pieces are held by museums and in private collections.”

Harry Roseland: His prints are selling for between $90 and $175; his paintings range from $500 to $15,000.

Henry O. Tanner: His work is expensive, with prices averaging around $250,000.

William Aiken Walker: His paintings of southern scenes “run from $4,000 to somewhere in the mid-teens.”

Reno recommends Jaubossen’s Price Guide and Fielding’s, a directory of artists, as reliable aids.

Considerations will become more important to them, and the acquisition of art will become a natural extension of their interests.”

This is not to say, however, that the task of advancing the commercial development of Afro-American art should be left solely to blacks themselves. Even if that were financially possible—which it is not—it would only increase the art’s peculiar separation from American art as a whole.

That positive development may result in exacerbating a yet too-common tendency to examine or appreciate works by Afro-American artists solely or chiefly for their explicitly “political” content or for other symbols easily identifiable as Afro-American. Sims worried that there may be a lingering unwillingness on the part of both blacks and whites to recognize the diversity and subtlety of Afro-American art—particularly as more black American artists express themselves in abstract, not representational, terms.

In that regard, black-owned art galleries and museums devoted to Afro-American art must continue their multifaceted mission: nurturing creative talent; introducing, if you will, black artists to the black public (and to the white public, too); educating the latter to a deeper appreciation of the art for its, not “political’s,” sake; and directly and indirectly pressuring the white art world to take broader notice of Afro-American art.

Despite the formidable obstacles hampering the commercial acceptability of Afro-American art, those interviewed expressed confidence that it has entered a new, more positive chapter of its history. “We’re in an era of no precedents to speak of,” said Alston, the art dealer. “We have to go by trial and error. But it has now been proved that there’s a broad, growing market for Afro-American art.”

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Palmer Hayden's widow owned this oil, *Virginia Teamster*, until 1983, when Kenkeleba House bought it for $3,000, to add to its permanent collection of 100-plus pieces of Afro-American and African art. It is currently valued at $6,000. Associate director Corinne Jennings calls Kenkeleba "an alternative space" that "sells on occasion."