

The Arts: News and Reviews

America's Black Artists Are Seen in New Light



New appreciation: Norman Lewis's "Madonna," a 1934 oil, is in the exhibition at the Jamaica Arts Center in Queens.

BLACK American artists of the 20th century as teachers of, students of and partners of white artists, are the focus of an exhibition that will open Saturday at the Jamaica Arts Center in Queens.

The exhibition, "Masters and Pupils: The Education of the Black Artist in New York — 1900-1980," will be on view through Feb. 28 at the center, 161-04 Jamaica Avenue, open Tuesday through Saturday from 10 A.M. to 5 P.M.

On display will be more than 50 works by 40 artists. The roster includes Hale Woodruff, Augusta Savage, Norman Lewis, Jacob Lawrence, Carl Holty, Charles Hawthorne, Robert Gwathmey, Elizabeth Catlett, Romare Bearden and Charles Alston.

The purpose of this exhibition is to demonstrate that black artists have been active in New York's art community during most of this century. William P. Miller, the center's executive director, says the existence of black artists is largely undocumented in "mainstream art history."

Mr. Miller cited the standard text "The History of Art" by H. W. Janson. In this work, he said, two major black American artists, Jacob Lawrence and Romare Bearden, were not mentioned in discussions of the periods "when they were important on the scene."

Little-Known History

Mr. Miller said one black artist, Bob Blackburn, operates the renowned Printmaking Workshop at 114 West 17th Street, which for 37 years has produced historic lithographs for numerous artists, including Andy Warhol and Robert Rauschenberg. Joseph Delaney studied at the Art Students League under Thomas Hart Benton and in a class with Jackson Pollock. Another black artist, William T. Williams, was the teacher of George Negroponte and Janet Fish.

Mr. Miller said that Mr. Lawrence, who exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art in 1941, had used the same art dealer as Ben Shahn but did not achieve equivalent stardom.

In 1940, the philosopher Alain Locke wrote in "The Negro in Art" that one reason "the Negro's career in the fine arts is little known either to the general or the racial public" was the "prevalent impression that the fine arts, with their more formalized techniques, are a less characteristic

and less congenial mode of expression for the Negro's admitted artistic genius than the more spontaneous arts of music, dance, drama or poetry."

Mr. Miller said his aim in this exhibition is to show "in a scholarly manner" the development of the black artist as a professional teacher and artist. "In the beginning," Mr. Miller said, "there were no black teachers to study with. But suddenly we had in the black community black artists who were becoming teachers. In the 1940's there were black art teachers in major universities. Now there are black art teachers all over; many are chairmen of art departments."

To construct this exhibition, Mr. Miller and Kellie Jones, the center's visual-arts director, found out where black artists studied and who their professors were. Ms. Jones said Charles Hawthorne, a white painter, taught William H. Johnson. Mr. Johnson was a pioneer black Modernist, one of the first black artists to paint Abstract Expressionist landscape and flower studies. He taught at the Harlem Arts Center in 1939 and 1940.

Works by Teachers and Students

Augusta Savage, a black painter and sculptor, studied at Cooper Union and at the Grande Chaumière in Paris. She was the first director of the Harlem Community Arts Center and one of her students was Norman Lewis, who also studied with Raphael Soyer. Mr. Lewis in turn later taught others at the Harlem Arts Center.

"We'll hang a work of an instructor or master next to the work of a pupil at that time," she said. "This will illustrate the intertwining of the white and black artists."

The exhibition, which has been underwritten by Metropolitan Life Insurance, will also include written documents and videotaped interviews. The interviewees include the painters William T. Williams and Jack Whitten and the multimedia artists Faith Ringgold and Camille Billops. Ms. Billops, the painters Benny Andrews and Elton Fax, Lowery Sims of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Barry Gaither of the National Center of Afro-American Art in Boston and Pritobia Benjamin from Washington were advisers to organizers of the exhibition.

The Jamaica Arts Center is a short walk from the Parsons Boulevard station of the IND line's E and F trains. It is also reached by the following buses: Q-6, Q-44, Q-46, Q-110, B-22, B-32 and B-56. Admission is free.