"He said to us, ‘I think it’s going to take about 30 years, maybe 40, before people stop caring whether I’m black and just pay attention to the work.’”

Tarin Fuller, daughter of the artist Norman Lewis, below, who died in 1979

The March Into the Museum

Black Artists, Long Neglected, Join an Expanding Canon

By RANDY KENNEDY

The painter Norman Lewis rarely complained in public about the singular struggles of being a black artist in America. But in 1979, dying of cancer, he made a prediction to his family. “He said to us, ‘I think it’s going to take about 30 years, maybe 40, before people stop caring whether I’m black and just pay attention to the work.’”

Lewis was just about right.

In the last few years alone, his work has been acquired by the National Gallery of Art in Washington, the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and the Museum of Modern Art in Manhattan. This month the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts opened the first extensive survey of Lewis, an important but overlooked figure in the Abstract Expressionist movement — and a man who might well have been predicting history’s arc for several generations of African-American artists in overcoming institutional neglect.

After decades of sporadic acquisitions, undernourished scholarship and token exhibitions, American museums are rewriting the history of 20th-century art to include black artists in a more visible and meaningful way than ever before, playing historical catch-up at full tilt, followed by collectors who are rushing to find the most significant works before they are out of reach.

“There was a joke for a long time that if you went into a museum, you’d think America had only two black artists — Jacob Lawrence and Romare Bearden — and even then, you wouldn’t see very much,” said Lowery Stokes Sims, the first African-American curator at the Metropolitian Museum of Art and later the president of the Studio Museum in Harlem. “I think there is a sea change finally happening. It’s not happening everywhere, and there’s still a long way to go, but there’s momentum.”

The reasons go beyond the ebbing of overt racism. The shift is part of a broader revolution underway in museums and academia to move from work from around the world and more work by women. But the change is also a result of sustained efforts by art historians and museum directors to make black artists’ work more visible and accessible.

An untitled oil on canvas, from 1949, by Norman Lewis.

Pledges to Cut Emissions Lag As Climate Talks Get Underway

By JUSTIN GILLES

After two decades of talks that failed to slow the relentless pace of global warming, negotiators from almost 200 countries are widely expected to sign a deal in the next two weeks to take concrete steps to cut emissions.

The prospect of progress, any progress, has elicited cheers in many quarters. The pledges that have already been announced “represent a clear and determined down payment on a new era of climate ambition from the global community of nations,” said Christiana Figueres, executive secretary of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, in a statement a month ago.

Yet the negotiations gathering
The March Into the Museum: Black Artists Join the Canon

"I think there is a sea change finally happening. It's not happening everywhere and there's still a long way to go, but there's momentum."

LOWERY STOKES SIMS, above, the first African-American curator at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and later the president of the Studio Museum in Harlem.

A basketball hoop as light fixture by David Hammons sold for $8 million in 2013, putting him among the most expensive living artists.

tained efforts over decades by black curators, artist-activists, colleges and collectors, who saw periods during the 1970s and the 1980s when heightened awareness of art by African-Americans failed to gain widespread traction.

In 2000, when Elliot Bostwick Davis arrived at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, as chairwoman of its Art of the Americas department, there were only three oil paintings by African-American artists in the wing, she said, and not many more paintings by African-Americans in the rest of the museum's collection. "I had to deal with a lot of blank faces on the collections committee, because they just didn't know these artists or this work," said Ms. Davis, whose museum has transformed its holdings in the last several years.
A More Even Playing Field

In interviews with more than two dozen artists, curators, historians, collectors, and dealers, a picture emerges of a contemporary art world where the playing field is becoming more even for young black artists, who are increasingly gaining museum presence and market clout. But artists who began working just a generation ago — and ones in a long line stretching back to the late 19th century — are only now receiving the kind of recognition many felt they deserved.

Like Norman Lewis, most of these artists showed up for the first time in permanent-collection galleries — including the paintings Beauford Delaney, Alma Thomas, Bob Thompson, Aaron Douglas and William H. Johnson — did not live to see the change.

But others, like the Los Angeles assemblage sculptor Betye Saar, 89, and the Washington-based abstract painter Sam Gilliam, 81, are witnessing it firsthand. The Chicago painter and printmaker Eldzier Cortor, who worked in New York for many years and died at 99 on Thanksgiving Day, lived to see his work featured in the inaugural show of the new downtown Whitney Museum. Mr. Cortor had been fielding curators' inquiries with increasing frequency and donating pieces he still owned because the market had ignored them for much of his life.

"It's a little late now, I'd say," he observed dryly during an interview last month in his Lower East Side studio. "But better than never."

And while it was bad enough for male artists, black women faced even steeper obstacles. "We were invisible to museums and the gallery scene," Ms. Saar said.

Through the rise of Modernist formalism and, especially, as abstraction took hold, black artists were often at a disadvantage because their work was perceived by the white establishment as "less," often figurative and too narrowly expressive of the black experience.

But even abstract artists like Lewis, who resisted pressure from within the black art world to be more overtly political, were excluded — in part, paradoxically, because when curators did seek out black artists' work,figurative work helped them check off a box. "Until about a half a dozen years ago, when curators came to us, they were really only interested in narrative works that showed the black experience so they could demonstrate in no uncertain terms to their viewers that they were committed to representing black America," said the New York dealer Michael Rosenfeld, who has shown work from black artists and their estates for decades. One in-