

The background of the cover is a classical oil painting of a landscape. It features a wide river or lake in the foreground, with several figures standing on the rocky shore. In the middle ground, there are small buildings and more figures. The background is dominated by large, rugged mountains under a sky filled with soft, white clouds. The overall style is reminiscent of 19th-century landscape painting.

28 Greats

A Celebration of African-American Art and Artists

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Kingsborough Art Museum
Kingsborough Community College, CUNY

28 Greats: KAM Celebrates African-American Art and Artists

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Kingsborough Art Museum
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Cover: Robert S. Duncanson, *Loch Long*, 1967. Oil on canvas, 19 1/2 x 33 inches. Indianapolis Museum of Art.

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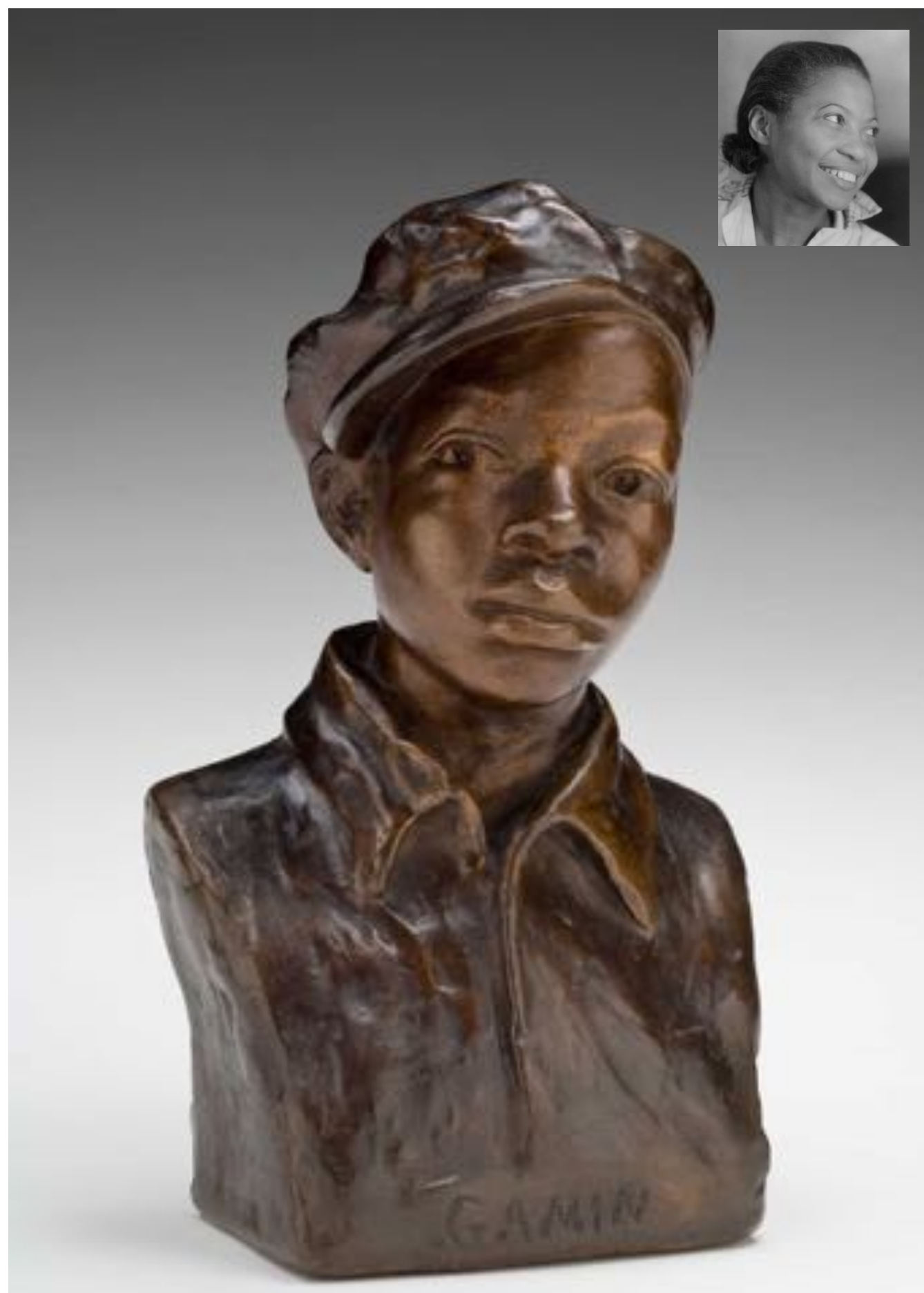


Robert S. Duncanson, *Loch Long*, 1867. Oil on canvas, 19 1/2 x 33 inches. Indianapolis Museum of Art. Inset: Robert S. Duncanson.

Robert S. Duncanson (American, 1821 - 1872) was an internationally-known landscape painter whose travels took him to Canada, England, Scotland, and the Grand Tour of European cultural centers. Born in Fayette, New York, Duncanson spent much of his early childhood in Michigan; his artistic career, however, blossomed as a portraitist in Cincinnati, Ohio, then a hub of Midwestern creativity. Inspired by the earlier so-called Hudson River School painters like Thomas Cole and Asher B. Durand, as well as the Romantic poets and the burgeoning Transcendentalist movement, Duncanson turned his attention to landscape painting, then a rare career path for aspiring African-American artists. During the Civil War he left for Canada, where he was enormously influential, and the United Kingdom; upon returning to Cincinnati after the war, he painted a number of works based on his travels to Scotland, including the stunning work above, *Loch Long*. As with many American landscapes of this period, the painting suggests the enormity, power, and beauty of Nature in relation to the far more ephemeral realm of human concerns. Most recently First Lady Dr. Jill Biden helped choose Duncanson's *Landscape with Rainbow* (1859) to represent the theme of the January 20, 2021 Inauguration, "Our Determined Democracy: Forging a More Perfect Union."

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Augusta Savage, *Gamin*, c. 1929. Plaster, 9.25 x 6 x 4 inches. Mint Museum, Charlotte, NC.
Inset: Augusta Savage, c. 1935-47.

Thought to be a portrait of her young nephew Ellis Ford, *Gamin* (French for "street urchin") marked the artistic debut of the pioneering American sculptor and arts educator **Augusta Savage** (1892-1962).

The expressive version of *Gamin* above, so natural and imbued with personality, was admired by countless children of color who finally saw themselves represented in the fine arts. The work received a favorable critical response as well, and helped Savage secure grants and other funding to sponsor her eventual studies in Paris.

Despite the success of *Gamin*, Savage faced numerous setbacks and painful discrimination throughout her career. She was born Augusta Christine Fells in Green Cove Springs, Florida; her strict Methodist minister father vehemently

disapproved of her passion for sculpture, believing it an immoral occupation. Frequent beatings ensued. In 1921 she left Florida for New York, where her artistic talents won her a prize spot at Cooper Union.

Nevertheless, her obstacles were many: her application for a government-sponsored summer program in France was refused on the basis of her race, an incident that made international news. Soon thereafter she was awarded the coveted *Prix de Rome*, (Rome Prize) but sadly had to turn it down when she was unable to secure travel and living expenses.

Married three times, her marital life was equally tragic, as two of her husbands died young. She would keep the surname of her second husband, James Savage, throughout her career.

A number of important commissions would follow, including portrait busts of African-American authors and civil rights leaders W.E.B. Du Bois, James Weldon Johnson, and Marcus Garvey. In the 1930s she founded the Savage Studio of Arts and Crafts; among her students were painters Jacob Lawrence and Gwendolyn Knight. Eventually the studio developed into the Harlem Community Art Center, a WPA-supported group instrumental to the Harlem Renaissance.

Another of Augusta Savage's most memorable works was *Lift Every Voice and Sing*, an enormous plaster created for the 1939 World's Fair in New York (right). As was the case with much of the art and architecture at these expositions, *Lift Every Voice and Sing* was considered ephemeral and was destroyed afterwards. Thankfully, *Gamin* and other works remain for us to appreciate the art and legacy of this pivotal sculptor.



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Malvin Gray Johnson, *Self-Portrait*, 1934. Oil on canvas, Smithsonian American Art Museum.

Perhaps less well known than other artists of the Harlem Renaissance, **Malvin Gray Johnson** (1896-1934) was a Modernist painter whose bold vision was characterized by an innovative style and palette. Born one of eight children in Greensboro, North Carolina, Johnson was encouraged in the arts at a young age by his older sister Maggie, who provided him with art supplies and lessons. He later attended the National Academy of Design in New York, although the nation's entry into World War I put his art training on hold as he was sent to France with the 94th Infantry Division. He returned to his studies in 1923.

Johnson found inspiration in the French Impressionists and Post-Impressionists, and in Cubist painters such as Pablo Picasso; he applied these styles to depictions of African-American life. Looking closely, one can see hints of Cubist angles and compositional choices in his *Self-Portrait* (1934, above). Behind Johnson is one of his paintings of



Malvin Gray Johnson
in his studio, c. 1930s.

African masks, a subject of interest to the Cubist painters as well as a powerful declaration of his own cultural and geographical roots. In his intriguing *Brothers* (1934, below), the figures faintly echo the farmers that populate Vincent van Gogh's pastoral landscapes. Johnson painted *Brothers* in the Blue Ridge mountains of Virginia as part of the New Deal's Public Works of Art Project, and one senses not only the solemn realities of African-American life in the Appalachian Mountains, but also the importance of family as one brother leans closely upon the other. Still, the picket fence, with its errant boards reaching out towards the picture plane, serves to frame and confine the figures within their rural existence.

Tragically, Malvin Gray Johnson died suddenly of a heart attack in 1934, just as he was beginning to receive attention for his commentaries on modern African-American life and culture. It has been estimated that he produced some 100 works, most in oil and watercolor, in his short career. His known existing paintings, which can be found today at Fisk University, the Schomburg Center (NYPL), and the Smithsonian Museum of American Art, reflect his considerable talents and substantial contributions to American Modernism.



Malvin Gray Johnson, *Brothers*, 1934. Oil on canvas, 38 x 30 inches. Smithsonian American Art Museum.

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Soon after the French inventor Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre announced his successful--albeit complex and somewhat dangerous--chemical process of capturing images onto silvered copper plates in 1839, enthusiastic entrepreneurs in Europe and America quickly realized a new and potentially artistic business. That process, the *Daguerreotype*, produced stunningly crisp images that continue to surprise us with their hauntingly beautiful realism. While some of the daguerreotype photographers of the period are well-known today, such as artist/inventor Samuel F.B. Morse and the Boston partners Albert Southworth and Josiah Johnson Hawes, there were many others whose names are lost to history or are otherwise not the first to come to mind.

One of the most successful of these was **James Presley Ball** (1825-1904, above), who ran one of the leading daguerreotype studios in the Midwest in the 1840s-1850s. Born a freeman of color in Virginia, Ball learned the painstaking process from John B. Bailey, an African-American photographer working in Boston. He attempted to ply his trade in various locations but found the greatest success in Cincinnati, where he established a lavish salon he named the *Daguerrean Gallery of the West* (right), which the *Eaton Democrat* described in 1854 as "a perfect boudoir, where all who come may luxuriate in the enjoyment of everything that art or genius can furnish for repose." As the exposure time for daguerreotypes was around twenty seconds, the relaxation of the sitter was essential in obtaining a natural portrait. The result, the story noted, were "gems of art and beauty-remarkable for accuracy of detail and faithfulness of likeness." Among Ball's notable clients were Frederick Douglass, famed singer Jenny Lind, P.T. Barnum, and, reportedly, Queen Victoria, whom he presumably photographed during a trip abroad in 1856.

Ball was also deeply involved with the abolitionist cause, exhibiting a 600-yard long (and now lost) panoramic painting entitled a *Mammoth Pictorial Tour of the United States, Comprising Views of the African Slave Trade*. It is believed that painter Robert S. Duncanson (the first subject of our 28 Greats profiles), who worked for a number of years in Ball's gallery, helped produce this enormous project. The panorama toured around Ohio and Boston, where its geographical and political lessons no doubt made an impact on viewers.



Above: James Presley Ball, *Alexander S. Thomas* (brother-in-law of the photographer). Quarter plate Daguerreotype, Cincinnati Art Museum.

Ball established a number of photographic studios during his career, at various times with his brother Thomas Ball and with his brother-in-law Alexander Thomas (shown in the daguerreotype above). Apparently of a nomadic temperament, Ball moved to various locations around the country over the years--including Honolulu, Hawaii, where he died in 1904. His granddaughter Alice Ball (1892-1916), the first woman and African-American to earn a masters degree from the University of Hawaii, was equally notable, having devised a successful method of treating leprosy.



William J. Pierce (engraver), after Wade, "Ball's Great Daguerrean [sic] Gallery of the West," wood engraving from *Gleason's Pictorial Drawing Room Companion*, April 1, 1854. National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian.

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Alma Thomas, *The Eclipse*, 1970. Acrylic on canvas, 62 x 49 3/4 inches. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington D.C.

In paintings such as *The Eclipse* (above), **Alma Woodsey Thomas** (1891-1978) sought to depict perceived nature through the language of abstraction, revealing the wonder of existence through canvases that revel in the delights of light and color. As she famously declared in 1970, "Through color I have sought to concentrate on beauty and happiness, rather than on man's inhumanity to man." While her formalist artistic outlook may have differentiated her from her more politically-minded contemporaries, Alma Thomas lived a life of service through teaching that is both admirable and quite remarkable.

Born in Columbus, Georgia in 1891, Alma Thomas moved with her family to Washington, D.C., at the age of sixteen to secure her and her three sisters a quality education. Recent events also may have influenced the move: a series of lynchings and race riots had occurred the previous year in Atlanta, and the Thomases were, despite their upper-middle class standing, no strangers to discrimination.

At Washington's Armstrong Technical High School her passion for art developed and flourished; an equal interest in teaching led to various positions before she decided, at age 30, to attend Howard University. The first graduate of its fledgling Art Department in 1924, Thomas then went on to earn an M.A. from Teachers College, Columbia.



Alma Thomas in the early 1970s.

Her pursuit of a steady, reliable occupation was tied to her lifelong determination to be an independent woman: viewing marriage and children as anathema to the life of a serious artist, she never married; instead, she devoted herself to a life of teaching art--for *thirty-five years*--at Shaw Junior High School in then-segregated Washington. It was only after her retirement, at age 69, that she was able to pursue a full-time career as a painter.

While she had occasionally exhibited during those years, and had lived a life immersed in the arts community of Washington (even attending advanced art courses at American University on nights and weekends from 1950-60), Thomas found liberation--and critical acclaim--after retirement. A first trip to Europe in 1958 was followed by her first serious solo exhibition the following year. A retrospective at Howard University in 1966 helped establish her as an artist whose work was on a par with the younger generation of color field painters such as Gene Davis and Kenneth Noland.

In 1972, at age 80, Alma Thomas became the first African-American woman to be given a solo exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art. That same year also brought a solo show at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, and her paintings soon entered the permanent collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, MoMA, the Brooklyn Museum, and other museums nationwide. In 2015 her painting *Resurrection* (1966) became the first work by an African-American woman to enter the collection of the White House.

Generally apolitical in her art, Alma Thomas instead sought meaning in the intimate perceptions of the natural world, rendering her optical and emotional visions into rough blocks of color and the symphony created by the spaces between them. Memories of her childhood in Columbus, interpretations of the view out her living room window--these were her artistic concerns even in the most turbulent of times. Nevertheless, hers is a story of persistence and optimism, of creating a meaningful legacy despite one's age or prior career path. As she once remarked, "I say everyone on earth should take note of the spring of the year coming back every year, blooming and gorgeous."



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Green Pastures: The Walls of Jericho is an eighty-feet-long bas-relief frieze created by Mississippi-born sculptor **Richmond Barthé** (1901-1989), one of the premier artists of the Harlem Renaissance. The direct inspiration was playwright Marc Connelly's Pulitzer-winning play *The Green Pastures*, which Barthé reportedly saw several times. Touted to be the first Broadway production to feature an all African-American cast, *The Green Pastures* was a retelling--in a stereotypical southern dialect that would undoubtedly raise eyebrows today--of the Old Testament through a presumed African-American experience. Nevertheless, Barthé was particularly enamored with the play's depiction of the Exodus, realizing in its drama the making of an equally dramatic sculptural project.

He designed the work with a specific site in mind: the back wall of a large amphitheater to be built at the Harlem River Housing Project at 152nd Street. The left half, *Exodus*, depicts the Connelly-inspired scene; the other half, *Dance*, represented another artform that Barthé held dear (one of his most famous sculptures is that of the Senegalese dancer Féral Benga). Created through a Works Progress Administration (WPA) project, Barthé's cast-stone frieze would have been the backdrop of a thriving theatre and performing arts scene in Harlem. Unfortunately, the amphitheater was never built, and the artist had little say in where his government-funded monument would be installed.

In 1941 the city opted to place the sculptures in the newly-built Kingsborough Houses in Crown Heights, Brooklyn. Then slated for low-income white families, the location was one seemingly incongruous with the monument's very specific themes of African-American theatre and dance. Its iconography was also very personal and culturally

Richmond Barthé, *Green Pastures: The Walls of Jericho (Exodus and Dance)*, 1937-38. Cast stone, 80 feet in length. Kingsborough Houses, Brooklyn. Panorama photo by Ken Lustbader/NYC LGBT Historic Sites Project. Inset: Richmond Barthé, c. 1930s.

important; Barthé, a closeted gay artist in the 1930s, was the first sculptor to make the black male body, the centerpiece of the *Dance* panels, a primary subject.

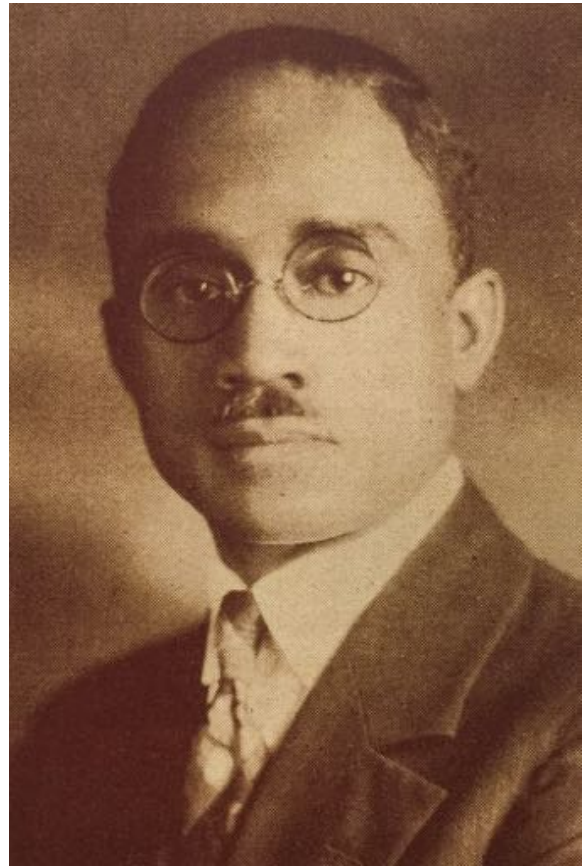
As often happens with public art in city housing, the frieze has suffered from decades of neglect: substantial cracks, loss of small sections, and general grime and wear. Scholars, most notably art historian Michele Bogart, have called for its much-needed conservation; thankfully, help is soon on the way. In January 2021 came the announcement that the Weeksville Heritage Society, the Public Design Commission, and Fulton Art Fair have joined forces to restore *Exodus* and *Dance* to mark the 120th anniversary of the sculptor's birth.



Richmond Barthé, *Dance* (detail), c. 1937-38. Kingsborough Houses.

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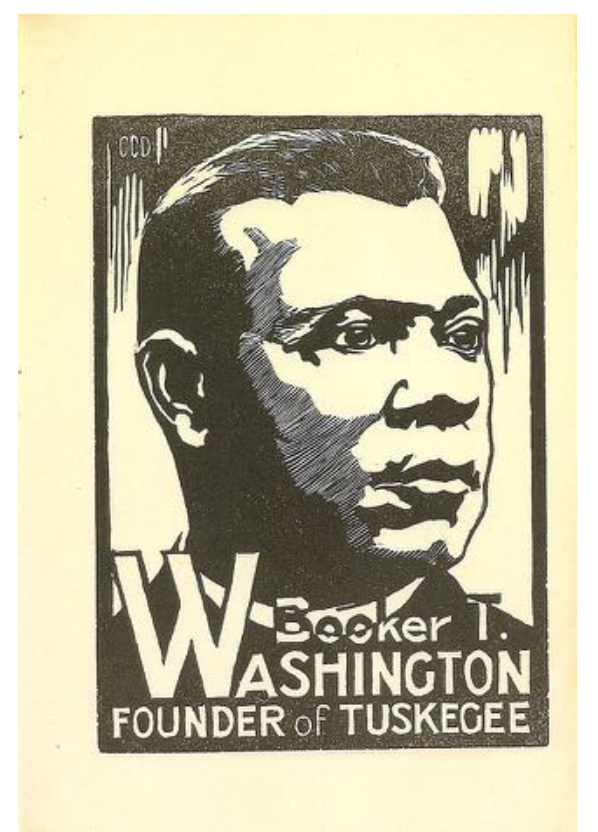


Illustrator, painter, and graphic designer **Charles C. Dawson** (1889-1981, left) was a leading figure in Chicago's art scene during the 1930s. Born in Brunswick, Georgia, he attended at the famed Tuskegee Institute in Alabama before traveling north to become the first African-American enrolled at the Art Students League in New York. Later he would study at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, earning tuition by working as a waiter at the Cliff Dwellers Club, a civic organization whose members included artist Henry Ossawa Tanner, architects Louis H. Sullivan and Frank Lloyd Wright, and other Chicago notables. Dawson would write of his experiences there in an unpublished autobiography entitled *Touching the Fringes of Greatness*.

He was the only African-American commissioned to play a role in the 1933 Century of Progress exhibition, creating a mural on the Great Migration for the Urban League as well as a promotional poster for *O, Sing a New Song*, a musical revue (above, right). That same year, believing children were not being sufficiently taught African-American history, Dawson wrote and illustrated *ABCs of Great Negroes*; it contained 26 linocut portraits of noted individuals (one for each letter of the alphabet, with accompanying short biographies), including that of *Booker T. Washington* (right).

Nevertheless, Charles C. Dawson is best remembered for the more commercial graphic design work he did in the 1930s for Valmor Products, a hair and beauty company that produced *Sweet Georgia Brown Hair Dressing* (pomade), *High Life Perfume* (below, right), and a variety of other products under various names. Sadly, the owners of Valmor, Morton and Rose Neumann, were unwilling to let Dawson and another African-American designer, Jay Jackson, sign their work. The packaging for these products was bold, bright, dripping with innuendo, and racially ambiguous to widen the customer base.

Dawson was also a stalwart organizer of exhibitions championing African-American artists. After leaving Valmor, Dawson returned to the Tuskegee Institute to serve as curator for its Museum of Negro Art and Culture at the George Washington Carver Museum. Retiring in 1951, he relocated to New Hope, Pennsylvania, where he lived until his death in 1981.



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William H. Johnson, *Three Friends*, c. 1944-45. Modified screenprint, 11 1/2 x 15 7/8 inches. Amon Carter Museum.

Modernist painter **William H. Johnson** (1901-1970, above, right) created an idiosyncratic pictorial language that merged European abstraction with African-American subject matter. Born in Florence, South Carolina in 1901, Johnson came to New York at age seventeen to study art at the National Academy of Design. As most of the instructors with whom he studied there were older and classically-trained in terms of style and expectations, Johnson sought additional art training from Charles Webster Hawthorne (1872-1930), the founder of the Cape Cod School of Art in Provincetown, Mass. His support proved invaluable to Johnson, as he raised \$1000 to send Johnson to Europe when a travel scholarship was awarded to another student.

Much of the next decade, 1927-1938, would be spent in Europe, first in Paris and in southern France. There he absorbed the revolutionary movements that developed between the wars. Europe was also where he would meet Holcha Krake, a Danish textile artist he married in 1930; they spent the next decade living in her native Scandinavia. Krake's interest in folk art fascinated Johnson, who would adopt a simplified, so-called primitivist folk style in his paintings--a style deemed "degenerate" by the Nazis who were soon to occupy Denmark. Concerned for their future, the couple moved to the United States in 1938,



William H. Johnson

and Johnson became even more committed to developing his unique form of abstraction. Through the Works Progress Administration (WPA), Johnson became an instructor at the Harlem Community Art Center, where he learned screen printing, incorporating it into his artistic practice (decades before Andy Warhol). Soon his work began to tell the story of the African-American experience in this medium, from rural farmers (such as *Sowing*, below) to urban musicians, and to the realities of racial violence.

Tragically, his innovative formal and technical genius, while recognized by some, was not lucrative for Johnson. After his wife Holcha died in 1944, he never fully recovered; his own medical situation, combined with her loss, brought him to a mental breakdown. He spent the remainder of his life, from 1947 to 1970, at the Central Islip State Hospital on Long Island. Like Vincent van Gogh, this troubled master of color, light, and spirit is recognized today as a pioneer of twentieth-century Modernism.



William H. Johnson, *Sowing*, c. 1942. Screenprint, 11 1/2 x 16 inches. Gibbes Museum of Art.

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Amy Sherald, *Miss Everything (Unsurpressed Deliverance)*, 2013. Oil on canvas, Private Collection.

Amy Sherald (b. 1973) is one of the leading artists working today. Her portraits, aesthetically powerful and permeated with political and social import, are notable for the artist's innovative use of grayscale, rather than various shades of brown, to paint her subjects, who are offset by monochromatic, faintly decorative pastel backgrounds.

Born in Columbus, Georgia, Sherald found herself one of the few African-American students in her elementary school, which she soon discovered dictated for her a predetermined narrative of African-American identity, speech and behavior.

While her parents envisioned for her a career in medicine, she abandoned pre-med studies for a fine arts degree at Clark Atlanta University (1997), ultimately earning her M.F.A. at the Maryland Institute College of Art (2004). In Baltimore (where she lived until 2018) she found inspiration for her portraits in strangers she encountered--creating a different story of African-American life in America. Her use of gray tones in these works both alludes to race and negates the traditional use of color to circumscribe and define it.

Sherald won the National Portrait Gallery's Outwin Boochever Portrait Competition in 2016 for *Miss Everything* (above). Soon thereafter she was chosen by Michelle Obama as her official portraitist, creating a stunning portrayal of the First Lady (below) perfectly paired with Kehinde Wiley's companion portrait of her husband. Last year, Sherald painted a tribute to Breonna Taylor for the cover of *Vanity Fair* (right). Through Taylor's assertive expression and pose she wanted to convey a sense of support and confidence in those seeking justice for her death. Other details--the gold cross, the wedding ring she would never wear--



Amy Sherald, *First Lady Michelle Obama*, 2018. Oil on linen, 75 x 63. National Portrait Gallery.

reflect a life lost and a future denied.

Sherald made headlines again when her double portrait *The Bathers* (2015) was sold at auction in December 2020 for a staggering \$4,265,000--far exceeding the high-end estimate of \$200,000.



Amy Sherald with her portrait of Breonna Taylor, painted for the September 2020 issue of *Vanity Fair*. Photo: *Vanity Fair*.

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Edmonia Lewis, *The Death of Cleopatra*, carved 1876. Marble, 63 x 31 x 46 inches.
Smithsonian American Art Museum. Inset: Edmonia Lewis, c.1870. Private Collection.

Unquestionably the most famous African-American sculptor of the nineteenth century, **Edmonia Lewis** (1844-1907) remains one of the most elusive in terms of a definitive biography; she herself seemed to enjoy crafting an ever-changing narrative as to her parentage and place of birth. It is believed, however, that she was born with the name *Wildfire* to Native American (Mississauga Ojibwe) and African-American parents in Greenbush, New York.

An exceptionally bright student, Mary Edmonia Lewis, as she would call herself, was able to attend Oberlin College through the financial support of an older brother and a group of abolitionists. While mercilessly discriminated against there (she was accused of poisoning two students, later accused of theft, and at one point horribly beaten by unknown assailants), Lewis developed her passion for art at Oberlin. A move to Boston led to the support and friendship of abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison, who, after a number of attempts to find an artist willing to take on an African/Native-American woman as a student, introduced her to the self-taught sculptor Edward Augustus Brackett. By 1864 Lewis had her own studio, where she modeled busts of abolitionist figures such as Garrison, John Brown, and Colonel Robert Gould Shaw. Needless to say, the dirty, dusty, and physically-demanding profession of sculptor was viewed at the time as anything but ladylike.

Despite her small successes in Boston, Rome was the desired destination for aspiring sculptors, and Lewis moved to the Eternal City in 1866. In addition to a cohort of male sculptors such as Hiram Powers and William Wetmore Story, there were a number of women sculptors there as well, most notably Harriet Hosmer. Neoclassicism was the stylistic preference of the period, as artists sought to rival the works of ancient Rome and the Renaissance; she supported herself by occasionally making small copies of popular works such as the bust of *Augustus* and Michelangelo's *Moses* for American tourists. Among the largest and most ambitious sculptures she created there was *The Death of Cleopatra* (1876, above), which she exhibited at the 1876 Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia. Lewis depicted the Egyptian queen in an almost blissful state after receiving the fatal bite of the asp; critics marveled at its life-like appearance. This realism was a definitive move away from neoclassical emulation and towards a more modern naturalism.

After the exposition, *The Death of Cleopatra* disappeared from view and from public memory; only after its resurgence in the late 1980s was the saga of its whereabouts revealed. For many years the sculpture stood in a saloon in Chicago. Then it was purchased by a notorious gambler and racetrack owner, "Blind John" Condon, who placed it on the grave of a racehorse named Cleopatra on his racetrack grounds. There it stood for decades in the harsh Chicago winters, as the property was transformed into a golf course, and then sold to the U.S. Navy and later to the U.S. Postal Service. Eventually the 2-ton sculpture, which had suffered substantial damage and vandalism, was carted off to a storage yard. Discovered there by a retired firefighter who saw its value, *Cleopatra* was brought to the Forest Park Historical Society, who sold it to its current caretakers, the Smithsonian American Art Museum, in 1994. Today Lewis is among the best-known and most appreciated of nineteenth-century American artists, in no small part due to this long-lost masterpiece.

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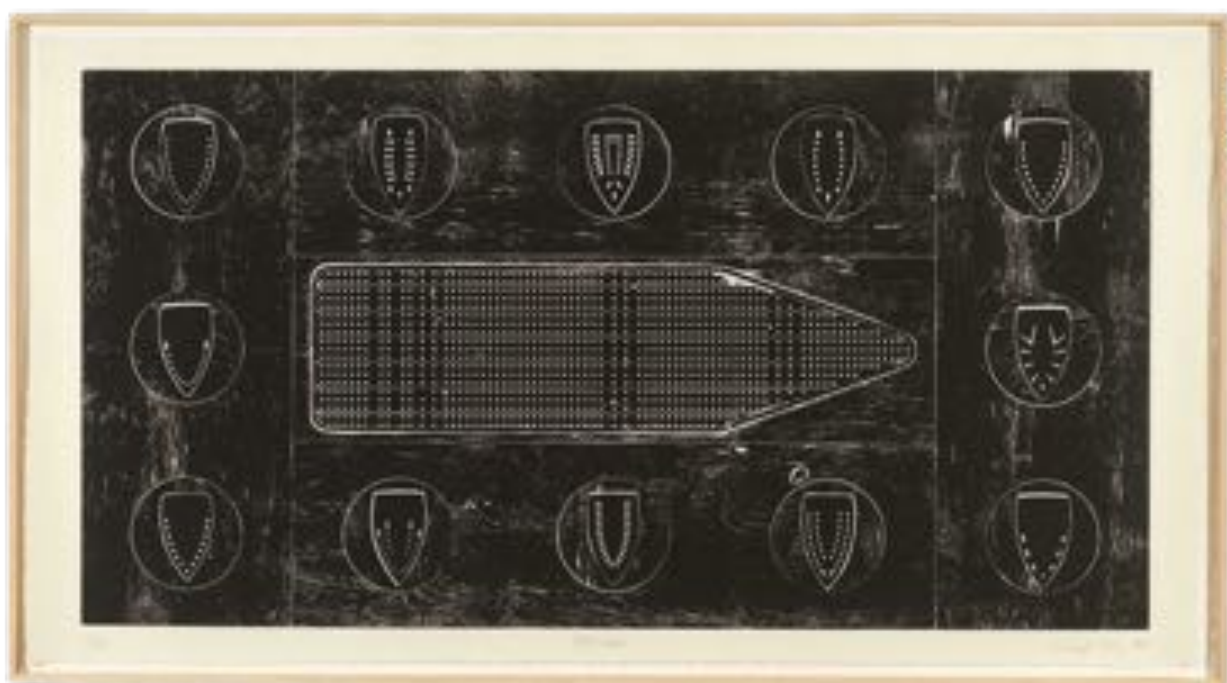
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Willie Cole, *Zebatown Mask*, 2015. Assemblage of shoes.



Willie Cole, *Domestic I.D. IV*, 1992. Steam iron scorch and pencil on paper, mounted in recycled wooden window frame. Museum of Modern Art, NY.



Willie Cole, *Stowage*, 1997. Woodcut and relief print. 55 1/2 x 104 5/8 inches. Whitney Museum of American Art.



Willie Cole. Photo: Alexander and Bonin, New York.

Artist **Willie Cole** (b. 1955, seated above in one of his works) transforms common objects--shoes, plastic bottles, steam irons, and other disposable objects--into sculptures and prints that reflect the history of the African diaspora in America. Highly conceptual, his pieces continue the tradition of Dada artists such as Marcel Duchamp and Man Ray, while speaking to the larger social issues of the postmodern era. Born in Somerville, New Jersey, Cole first came to prominence through a series of revolutionary prints he made from the business end of irons (left, middle). The resulting images resembled African masks, as he describes on his artist website:

"I didn't choose the steam iron, the steam iron chose me. My relationship with it began in 1988 when I spotted one on the street near my Newark studio, all flattened and discarded, looking up at me. Right away I saw it as an African mask, more specifically a Dan mask...Untangling and understanding the physicality of the iron eventually led to seeking a way to express the spirituality of the iron as well. Spirituality, as I defined it then, was the unseen force that gives expression to all things. And in the case of the iron, that life force was heat, and the evidence of that heat was the scorch."

In other works in this series, Cole created prints from the ironing board as well, evoking the well-known prints depicting the crowded hulls of slave ships (left, bottom). Another series, *Heels*, uses shoes as a sculptural medium, arranging them into African-style masks (left, top) as well as flower blossoms, furniture, and assorted creatures. If one considers it the mission of the true artist to help viewers to see the world and its objects in unforeseen, unprecedented ways, then Willie Cole has fulfilled that obligation tenfold. His thought-provoking pieces can be found in the permanent collections of the Metropolitan Museum of art, the High Museum of Art, the National Gallery of Art, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art, and numerous other museums around the world.

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Hale Woodruff, *The Trial of the Amistad Captives*, 1938. 72 x 252 inches. Dr. William R. Harvey Museum of Art, Talladega College.



In 1938 Alabama's Talladega College, one of the nation's earliest HBCUs, commissioned painter **Hale Woodruff** (1900-1980) to create six mammoth murals for its new Savery Library. Unveiled in 1939, the vibrant murals marked the centennial of the famed Amistad mutiny, the infamous 1839 revolt aboard a Spanish schooner in which 111 Africans, including the leader of the mutiny, Joseph Cinqué, were illegally captured. The captives killed the crew, took two slave merchants as hostages, and demanded they be returned; instead the two unscrupulous men directed the Amistad to Connecticut, where the ship was soon overtaken by the government and the captives arrested. Through the support of abolitionists, the case--which went all the way to the Supreme Court--was ruled in favor of the captives, who returned to Africa in 1842. Woodruff did extensive research on the event (then less well-known, being nearly sixty years before Steven Spielberg's *Amistad*) at Yale University. The almost life-size scenes depict *The Mutiny*, *The Trial* (above), and *The Repatriation of the Freed Captives* (bottom left). Woodruff's other three murals depict scenes related to the founding of the college and to African-American history, including *The Underground Railroad* (bottom right). Conserved through a partnership with the High Museum of Art, the murals were recently (2020) relocated to a new museum building on the college's campus.

Born in Cairo, Illinois, Hale Woodruff spent his childhood in Nashville. After studying at the Herron School of Art and Design (Indianapolis), the Art Institute of Chicago, and the Fogg Art Museum (Harvard University), Woodruff spent four formative years (1927-1931) in Paris. A lack of funds forced his return, and he began a career as chair of the art department of Atlanta University, instituting annual art exhibitions that featured predominately African-American artists. Woodruff's style and focus would change in the summer of 1936, when he had the opportunity to study fresco painting in Mexico with famed muralist Diego Rivera; he would apply the lessons learned there in his *Amistad* murals at Talladega. Moving to New York in 1946, Woodruff began a teaching career at New York University, where he taught until 1968. It was during this period that Woodruff formed the African-American artist collective *Spiral* with Romare Bearden; during its existence (1963-1965) the group advocated for social change, civil rights, and the development of a uniquely African-American art.



Hale Woodruff, *The Repatriation of the Freed Captives*, 1938. 72 x 120 inches. Dr. W.R. Harvey Museum.



Hale Woodruff, *The Underground Railroad*, 1938. 72 x 120 inches. Dr. William R. Harvey Museum of Art.

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Terry Adkins

The visually stunning conceptual art of artist and musician **Terry Adkins** (1953-2014) is as multi-faceted as it is intriguing. His exhibitions, or *recitals*, as he often referred to them, combined sculpture, musical performance, photography, and video art. Exploring little-known or understudied aspects of historical figures, or the obscure connections he discovered between them, his work elevated the notion of the found object or readymade into a deeper, more nuanced quest for truth. At the heart of his artistic practice were skillful research and keen insight; for instance, his 2012 exhibition *Nutjuitok (Polar Star)* was inspired by research on the African-American explorer Matthew Henson, who accompanied Robert Peary on his expeditions to the Arctic, including the 1909 voyage to the North Pole (reportedly, Henson, an expert navigator, had reached the pole ahead of Peary). Adkins himself traveled to the Arctic to better understand Henson's experience. Another recital, *The Principalities* (2012), was based on the period Jimi Hendrix spent as a U.S. Army paratrooper with the 101st Airborne.

Music was essential to his art and his life: his parents were both amateur musicians in Washington, D.C., where Adkins was born in 1953. He envisioned a career as a musician himself, although the visual arts soon became his passion. At Fisk University, where he studied with famed artists Aaron Douglas and Martin Puryear, he pursued printmaking, later earning his M.F.A. from the University of Kentucky. Music, however, would soon merge with his art (where bass drums, cymbals, and improbably-constructed horns become sculptural objects), and his band/performance group the Lone Wolf Recital Corps was often integral to his installations. As he revealed in 2006, "My quest has been to find a way to make music as physical as sculpture might be, and sculpture as ethereal as music is. It's kind of challenging to make both of those pursuits do what they are normally not able to do. That has been my challenge."



Installation of works by Terry Adkins



Terry Adkins, *Nutjuitok (Polar Star)*, 2012

While his art often included found or repurposed objects, he viewed them in different terms than his predecessors, calling the process *potential disclosure*--suggesting the meanings of those objects need to be discovered or sussed out by the artist and the viewer. His thought-provoking installations earned him both a USA Fellowship (2008) and the coveted Rome Prize (2009). Before his death in 2014, Adkins exhibited at numerous international venues, including the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, MoMA and MoMA PS1, and Project Binz 39 In Zurich, Switzerland. When asked what he hoped his legacy would be, Adkins remarked, "I want to be remembered as a creative individual, who in spite of the tide of the horizontal breadth of image-driven work by Black American artists, stood for something else; stood for something different. I hope that a hundred years from now some little boy or girl somewhere, will see something that I have done, and pick up the baton and go on to continue the tradition."

28 Greats

A Celebration of African-American Art and Artists

MATT BAKER

1921



1959

PIONEERING AFRICAN-AMERICAN COMIC BOOK ARTIST!

WHO IS MATT BAKER, YOU ASK? WELL, TRUE BELIEVERS, MATT BAKER (1921-1959) WAS A LEGENDARY AFRICAN-AMERICAN ARTIST WHO HELPED INAUGURATE THE GOLDEN AGE OF COMIC BOOKS IN THE 1940S. 'NUFF SAID!



BORN IN NORTH CAROLINA IN 1921, CLARENCE MATTHEW BAKER WAS RAISED IN PITTSBURGH, PA. DUE TO A HEART CONDITION, WE WASN'T ELIGIBLE FOR MILITARY SERVICE DURING WWII; INSTEAD HE APPLIED TO STUDY ART AT THE COMPETITIVE COOPER UNION IN NEW YORK CITY.



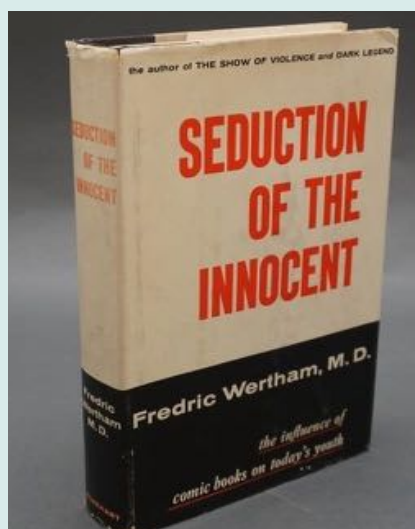
BAKER WAS RENOWNED AS AN ILLUSTRATOR OF WOMEN-- PARTICULARLY WHAT WERE CALLED "GOOD GIRLS"--BEAUTIFUL, FEISTY, AND DANGEROUS, PERHAPS, BUT ULTIMATELY GOOD FEMALE HEROINES. IT WAS ON THE BASIS OF HIS SKETCHES OF WOMEN THAT THE JERRY IGER STUDIO, A SORT OF DISPATCHER FOR COMIC STORIES TO PUBLISHERS, HIRED HIM IMMEDIATELY.



HIS FIRST KNOWN PUBLISHED COMIC ART WAS A 12-PAGE STORY IN JUMBO COMICS #69 (NOV. 1944), FEATURING "SHEENA, QUEEN OF THE JUNGLE." FOR THIS STORY BAKER PENCILED AND INKED ONLY THE WOMEN, INCLUDING THE TITLE CHARACTER.



THROUGHOUT THE FORTIES BAKER WORKED ON NUMEROUS ADVENTURE AND ROMANCE COMICS. ONE OF HIS MOST POPULAR WAS "PHANTOM LADY." HIS SLIGHTLY SUGGESTIVE COVER OF PHANTOM LADY #17 (APRIL 1948) HAS THE ADDED DISTINCTION OF BEING ILLUSTRATED IN PSYCHIATRIST FREDERICK WERTHAM'S INFAMOUS STUDY "SEDUCTION OF THE INNOCENT" AS A PRIME EXAMPLE OF THE IRREPARABLE HARM OF COMIC BOOKS ON CHILDREN.



BAKER IS ALSO CHAMPIONED AS A PIONEERING FIGURE FOR THE LGBTQ COMMUNITY; WHILE DISCREET ABOUT HIS SEXUAL IDENTITY TO ALL BUT HIS CLOSEST FRIENDS DURING HIS LIFETIME, HIS FRIEND AND FELLOW COMIC ARTIST FRANK GIUSTO REVEALED IN 2012 THAT BAKER WAS ONE OF THE FEW KNOWN GAY ARTISTS WORKING IN THE GOLDEN AGE OF COMIC BOOKS.



IN HIS PROLIFIC BUT SHORT CAREER, BAKER EVEN WORKED FOR ATLAS COMICS, THE PRECURSOR TO MARVEL; HE ILLUSTRATED "SHOWDOWN AT SUNUP," NOW ATTRIBUTED TO WRITER STAN LEE, FOR GUNSMOKE WESTERN #32 (DEC. 1955). MATT BAKER DIED IN 1959, AT AGE 37, FROM A HEART ATTACK. IN 2009, FIFTY YEARS AFTER HIS DEATH, HIS CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE FIELD WERE RECOGNIZED...BY INDUCTION INTO THE WILL EISNER COMIC BOOK HALL OF FAME. EXCELSIOR!



28 Greats

A Celebration of African-American Art and Artists



Bisa Butler with *The Warmth of Other Sons* (2020). Photo by Gioncarlo Valentine, *New York Times*.

Fiber artist **Bisa Butler** (b. 1973) creates brilliant--and brilliantly-colored--quilted portraits that are steeped in tradition yet refreshingly contemporary in style and substance. With the deft precision of a painter Butler assembles a patchwork of patterned fabric pieces in ways that astound the viewer in their ability to suggest space, depth, texture, and, perhaps most surprising for the medium, personality and psychological depth. Born in Orange, New Jersey, she attended Howard University, where she studied with Elizabeth Catlett and Ernie Barnes; after earning a master's degree from Montclair State University, she pursued a career in public school arts education in Newark. Influenced by artists Romare Bearden and Faith Ringgold in their use, respectively, of collage and textiles, Butler also cites the Chicago-based art collective AfriCOBRA as pivotal in shaping her design aesthetic. Growing up watching her mother and grandmother sew, however, led her towards using quilts and patterns as her palette.



Bisa Butler, *Southside Sunday Morning*, 2018. Cotton and silk. 109 x 73 in.



Bisa Butler, *The Storm, the Whirlwind, and the Earthquake*, 2020. Cotton, silk, wool, and velvet quilted and appliqu , 50 x 88 x 2 in.

Often taking 1,000 hours or more to complete, Butler's quilts are often based on vernacular photographs; she transforms these black and white snapshots of unknown, but compelling individuals into bold compositions of color and elegance. In other works, musicians such as Nina Simone and Marvin Gaye, as well as historical figures like Frederick Douglass (above) are reimagined in Butler's technicolor vision. In the fall of 2016 KAM presented *Return to Me: Portraits by Fiber Artist Bisa Butler*. In recent years, however, her career has skyrocketed, with major solo exhibitions at the Katonah Museum of Art (2020, NY) and the Art Institute of Chicago (2020-2021). Her work has been featured in *The New York Times*, *Smithsonian Magazine*, and on the covers of *Fiber Art Now* and *Time Magazine*.

28 Greats

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Ulysses Davis, *Self-Portrait*. 1940-1985. Wood, 8 1/4 x 4 1/4 x 3 inches. King-Tisdell Cottage Foundation.



Ulysses Davis seated in front of his barber shop, Savannah, Georgia. Photo by Roland L. Freeman.



Ulysses Davis, *Tomb of Pontius Pilate*, 1940-1985. Wood, 7 x 3 3/8 x 5 1/4 inches. King-Tisdell Cottage Foundation.

Although not well-known outside the cloistered coterie of folk art connoisseurs, self-taught sculptor **Ulysses Davis** (1914-1990) was an ingenious and prolific artist whose hand-carved portrait busts, biblical figures, and fanciful creatures are today considered among the best examples of southern folk sculpture. Born the son of a railroad fireman in Fitzgerald, Georgia, Davis added to the meager family resources by dropping out after the fourth grade and apprenticing to a railroad blacksmith. He spent the first half of his life working for the railroad in Savannah; after a layoff in the 1950s, Davis embarked on a new career: barber. The Ulysses Barber Shop became not only a means of support (and a gathering spot for the community), it quickly became a showcase gallery for the unique wooden sculptures he had created as a compulsive pastime.

Teaching himself how to whittle as a child, Davis had only his instincts to guide him; using his blacksmithing skills and the blades from his barber scissors and clippers, he often fabricated his own carving tools. For a patina, Davis used what was at hand--shoe polish. Unlike most sculptors, he usually began without preliminary sketches other than the ideas in his mind. Even his choice of wood was unorthodox--Davis used shipyard lumber or pieces of wood given by his friends.



Ulysses Davis, *Theodore Roosevelt*, 1970s. Mahogany and paint, 8 5/8 x 4 1/2 x 2 3/4 inches.

Ulysses Davis created some three hundred sculptures in his career, ranging from the spiritual (such as *Tomb of Pontius Pilate*, bottom left) to the intensely patriotic. His series of forty busts of United States presidents (below, right) is perhaps his best-known work, with *Theodore Roosevelt* (above) being one of the standouts. Other pieces evoke African history and historical figures. Still others, such as *Sputnik* (below), defy description and fall into that indefinable realm of brilliance and the surreal often inherent to the folk aesthetic. Davis had little interest in selling his work. "These things are very dear to me," he said of his carvings. "They're a part of me. They're my treasure. If I sold these, I'd be really poor." In 2009, the American Folk Art Museum and the High Museum of Art recognized his achievements with a retrospective exhibition, *The Treasure of Ulysses Davis*.



Ulysses Davis, *Sputnik*, 1960-1986. Wood, 7 x 3 3/8 x 5 1/4 inches. Collection of Margaret Robson.



Display of United States presidents by Ulysses Davis. Mahogany and paint, carved 1970s-1988.

28 Greats

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Margaret Taylor-Burroughs, circa 1948. Chicago Public Library.

Artist, poet, arts administrator, educator, and political activist **Dr. Margaret Taylor-Burroughs** (1915-2010, left) was a pivotal figure in the creation and promotion of African-American art and artists. Her primary medium as a visual artist was linocut (linoleum prints), a form of printmaking that, at its best, uses the simple power of line to convey powerful visual ideas (such as *Princess Ife*, right). Her influence, however, went far beyond her artistic endeavors.

Born Victoria Margaret Taylor in St. Rose Parish, Louisiana, she moved with her family during the Great Migration to Chicago in 1920. After high school--where she was friends and classmates with the poet Gwendolyn Brooks--she earned degrees from Chicago Teachers College and the Art Institute of Chicago (she had won a scholarship to Howard University, but her family lacked the resources to send her). While her steady day job was teaching at DuSable High School (in later years she taught at Kennedy-King Community College and Elmhurst College), Burroughs was steadfast to the cause of elevating the arts in her city. In 1940 she helped found the South Side Community Art Center, the first African-American art museum in the nation. With her second husband Charles Burroughs she founded--in the ground floor of their home--the Ebony Museum of Negro History and Art (1961), renamed seven years later as the DuSable Museum of African-American History. Both the South Side Community Center and the DuSable Museum (although in new quarters since 1973) exist today, testaments to the enduring legacy of Margaret Taylor-Burroughs.

Her linocuts, while seemingly innocuous genre scenes, are often politically charged. In prints such as *Birthday Party* (right, middle) and *In School--Together* (right, bottom), Burroughs presents an integrated, harmonious world of children interacting without prejudice (unsurprisingly, during the Red Scare of the 1950s, when the civil rights movement was viewed as a communist front, Burroughs was often under surveillance for her ideas on integration). It was a sentiment that echoes through her poetry as well; in poems such as "What Shall I Tell My Children Who Are Black (Reflections of an African-American Mother)," she wrote that the solution to survival in America was instilling a sense of pride in the struggles and triumphs of African-American culture, truths "so often obscured and omitted." True to form, she would bring a hand mirror with her on her frequent visits to school groups; holding it towards them, she would say: "Look at yourself! You are the most beautiful thing there is!" After her passing in 2010, President Barack Obama cited her contributions to Chicago's cultural life, recognizing her as "an esteemed artist, historian, educator, and mentor...admired for her generosity and commitment to underserved communities through her children's books, art workshops, and community centers that both inspired and educated young people about African-American culture."



Margaret Taylor-Burroughs, *Princess Ife*. Linocut.



Margaret Taylor-Burroughs, *Birthday Party*. Linocut.



Margaret Taylor-Burroughs, *In School--Together*. Linocut, undated.

28 Greats

A Celebration of African-American Art and Artists

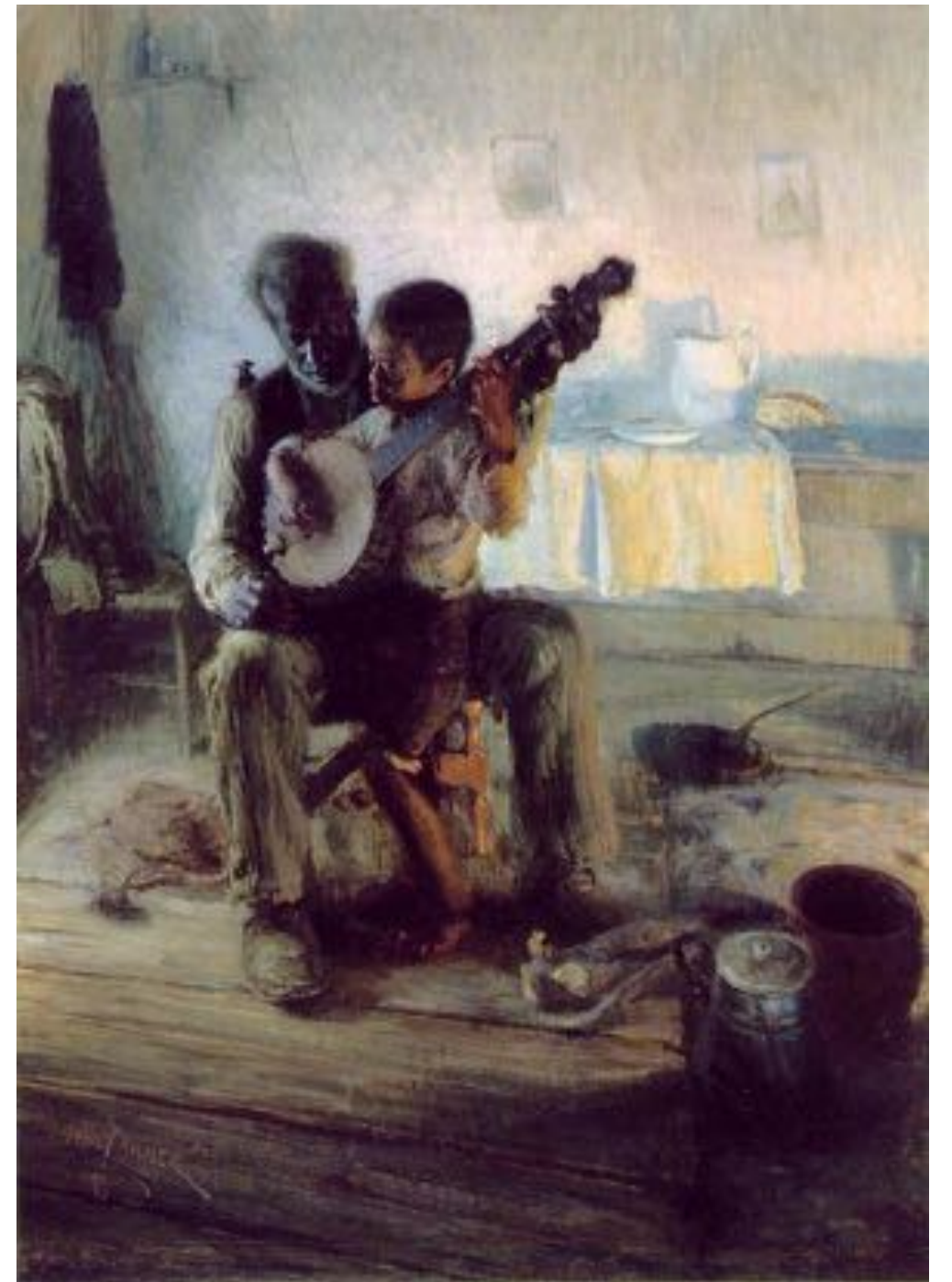


Perhaps more than any other artist of his generation-- certainly more than any previous artist in the nineteenth century--**Henry Ossawa Tanner** (1859-1937, left) used his life and art to challenge the deep and internalized societal stereotypes of African-American life and culture. His long artistic career, far too extensive to cover adequately in this series of short vignettes, was also one of the most internationally successful.

Tanner was born in Pittsburgh, the son of Benjamin Tucker Tanner, a well-known bishop in the African methodist Episcopal (AME) Church, and Sarah Miller Tanner, a former slave who escaped to the north as a child via the Underground Railroad. At the age of thirteen, Tanner and his family moved to Philadelphia, where in 1879 he began his studies at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts (as the only African-American student). One of the instructors who befriended him there was the painter Thomas Eakins (1844-1916), who saw and encouraged his talents. The other students, however, subjected him to racist hazing; a group of students reportedly once tied him to his easel and left him out in the middle of Broad Street. Tanner sought an escape from such indignities, and, like most artists of his generation, longed to live and study in Paris, then the capital of the contemporary art world; to raise money for the journey he attempted a photography business in Atlanta, which was unsuccessful, and teaching at Clark Atlanta University.

Eventually funds were raised through an exhibition of his work held by a wealthy patron who, finding no buyers for Tanner's paintings, purchased every work in the show. He soon found that France provided a considerably greater sense of freedom and respect as an artist and a human being. As Tanner later noted, "In America, I'm *Henry Tanner, Negro artist*, but in France, I'm *Monsieur Tanner, l'artiste américaine*." He would spent his career in France, dying in Paris in 1937.

Much of Tanner's work was religious in nature, inspired by trips to Jerusalem and the Palestine region, and undoubtedly by his upbringing in the AME. But it was on one of his infrequent trips back to the United States that he began two of his best-known works, *The Banjo Lesson* (1893) and *The Thankful Poor* (1894). It was also two rare instances of his depicting African-American subjects. In both these works Tanner has redefined the stereotypical tropes common to prior nineteenth-century depictions of African-Americans: musicians, in particular the banjo players common to minstrelsy and racist caricature; and fervent religiosity. Instead of buffoonery or false sentimentality, Tanner depicts the noble beauty of intimate family moments. In *The Banjo Lesson*, an elderly man patiently teaches a young boy to play the African-derived instrument, their differences in age marking the transition to a post-Emancipation society and the hopes of a better future; in *The Thankful Poor*, for which it is believed he used the same two models, Tanner allows us a glimpse at a private moment of faith in the face of humble means and humbler meals. The powerful use of light in both these works perfectly accentuates these simple yet profound moments of humanity.



Henry Ossawa Tanner, *The Banjo Lesson*, 1893. Oil on canvas, 48 x 35 inches. Hampton University



Henry Ossawa Tanner, *The Thankful Poor*, 1894. Oil on canvas, 35 1/2 x 44 1/4 inches. Private Collection..

28 Greats

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Ernie Barnes at his debut exhibition (1966) at the Grand Central Art Galleries. A critical and popular success, every work in the show sold.

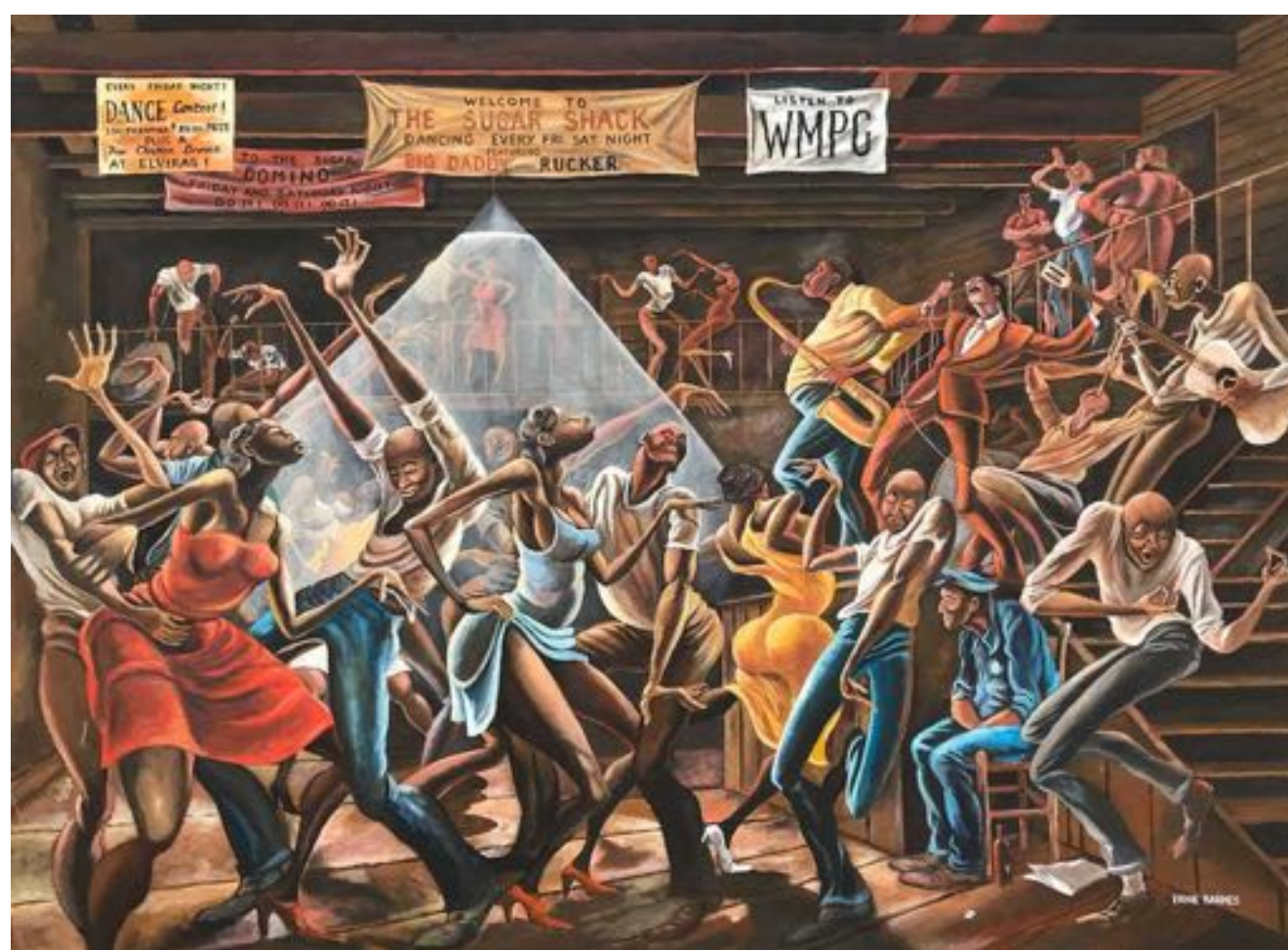
Television viewers of a certain age will recognize the art of **Ernie Barnes** (1938-2009, left), although perhaps not by name. Conversely, sports fans may recognize the name but not the art; obscure film aficionados may recognize his face but not his other vocations. For Barnes, a professional football player turned professional artist (who also dabbled with acting), was talented on a number of fronts. Born in Durham, North Carolina, Barnes had an interest in drawing from childhood. A high school coach, noticing his artistic talents, encouraged him to pursue athletics to improve his body as well as his mind; his skill on the field led to his becoming football captain, later earning a full scholarship (as an art major) at North Carolina Central University. He would later play offensive lineman for the Baltimore Colts (1959-60), the Titans of New York (1960), the San Diego Chargers (1960-62), and the Denver Broncos (1963-64). He briefly played with the Canadian Football League before a foot fracture led to his retirement in 1965. It was then that Barnes devoted himself to his other passion, painting.

His first exhibition at the Grand Central Art Galleries in New York (1966, shown above) was a critical and popular success. The subject matter was, as one might expect, football. Barnes expressed the combative nature of the sport, seeking to provide viewers with a visceral experience. "Football has been my life and that's what I paint," he explained in an Associated Press interview. "If it has to be classed or labeled, I'd say my paintings were impressionistic. I'm trying to tell people what it's like, how football players really feel." He also revealed that during his games, against regulations, he would keep a small pencil and paper tucked into his sock, and would make a quick sketch if he saw something on the field that would make a good painting.

But it was his depictions of African-American life that would have the greatest cultural significance and impact. His 35-painting exhibition *The Beauty of the Ghetto* (1972) traveled around the country through 1979. One of the most recognized paintings from this period was *The Sugar Shack* (1971, below). It was used as the end credits of the popular sitcom *Good Times* (1974-79), which revolved around the lives of the Evans family in a Chicago housing project. One of the characters, J.J. (played by Jimmie Walker, below left with Barnes), is an aspiring painter; most of J.J.'s paintings used in the show were actually painted by Barnes.



Left: Ernie Barnes with actor Jimmie Walker.



Ernie Barnes, *The Sugar Shack*, 1971. Oil on canvas. Private Collection.

The Sugar Shack achieved further recognition when Marvin Gaye used it (with minor modifications from Barnes) as the cover of his 1976 album *I Want You*. Painted in a Neo-Mannerist, elongated style, *The Sugar Shack* depicts a moment in the artist's young life when he discovered that dance was a means of releasing pent up tensions and frustrations. A 2019 retrospective exhibition at the California African American Museum (Los Angeles), which included *The Sugar Shack*, had nostalgic viewers standing in line to see the iconic painting, some forty years after *Good Times* aired its final episode.

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Ming Smith, *Self-Portrait*, c. 1988. © Ming Smith.

One of the most experimental and expressive visual chroniclers of New York life in the 1970s, Detroit-born photographer **Ming Smith** (left) remains a vital force in the nation's cultural milieu. She was raised in Columbus, Ohio, where her love of the medium developed early: as a kindergartener, she brought her mother's Kodak Brownie camera to class to photograph her classmates. Despite a high school guidance counselor's reprehensible advice that college would be a "waste" for someone whose future career would be as spent as "a domestic," she graduated from Howard University. In 1973 she came to New York, where she soon became a member of the famed Kamoinge Workshop, a group comprised of African-American photographers seeking to counter the depictions of black life in the mass media by creating their own, more positive narratives. Founded in 1963 by Louis Draper, Adger Cowans, Anthony Barboza, and others, Kamoinge--roughly meaning "a group of people working together" in the Kikuyu language of Kenya--are now being recognized for their pioneering contributions to twentieth-century photography (a retrospective exhibition of their work is currently on view at the Whitney Museum through March 28, 2021). The only woman in Kamoinge, Smith was treated as an equal and vital member of the group, which prided itself on its professionalism and dedication to the craft of photography.

Smith's early images were characterized by their deliberate blurriness, their poignant but seemingly ethereal impressions of urban life. Her photographs were the first by an African-American woman to enter the permanent collection of the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA). She also excelled at portraiture, photographing such notables as Grace Jones, Tina Turner, and Sun Ra (right). While there were years of apparent disregard for the work of the Kamoinge group, recent exhibitions have led to a renewed scholarly and popular interest. The recently-published *Ming Smith: An Aperature Monograph* (2020) places her work in its social and political context, as did the Brooklyn Museum's exhibition *The Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power* (2018).



Ming Smith, *Sun Ra Space II*, New York, 1978. © Ming Smith.



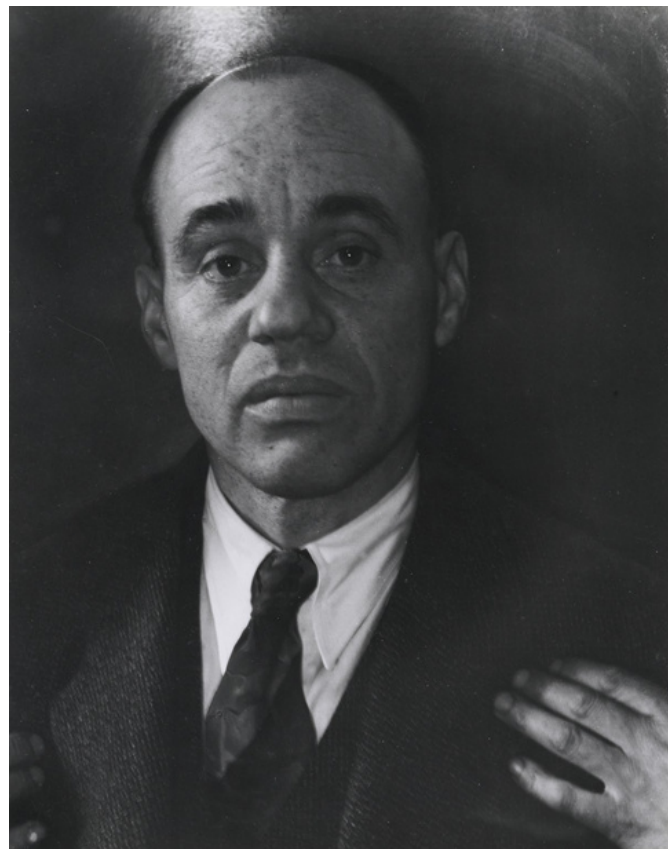
Ming Smith, *When You See Me Comin' Raise Your Window High*, Harlem, 1972. © Ming Smith.



Ming Smith, *America Seen Through Stars and Stripes*, New York City, NY, 1976. © Ming Smith.

28 Greats

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Sargent Johnson in 1934. Photo by Consuelo Kanaga.

While considered an important artist of the Harlem Renaissance, the American sculptor, painter, printmaker, and ceramicist **Sargent Claude Johnson** (1888-1967) was born in Boston and spent most of his career in San Francisco. His mother was of African-American and Cherokee descent and his father, of Swedish heritage; Johnson identified, however, as African-American. After losing both of his parents by 1905, Johnson and his five siblings were sent to live with his aunt and uncle in Washington, D.C. His aunt, May Howard Jackson (1877-1931), was an accomplished sculptor who likely offered her nephew some artistic instruction.

Moving to San Francisco in 1915 to pursue an artistic career, Johnson began taking art classes at the A.W. Best School of Art and at the California School of Fine Arts. Eclectic in style as well as medium--working in terra-cotta, copper, wood, cast stone, as well as in two-dimensional lithographs, drawings, and paintings--Johnson was equally wide-reaching in his themes. From ceramic portraits (such as the glazed stoneware *Elizabeth Gee*, 1927, bottom right) to the polychrome wood *Forever Free* (1933, top right), he channeled asian art, folk art, and Egyptian polychromy. In this latter work, the upward-looking mother, solid, stalwart, and columnar, protects two children incised in low relief. The deceptively simple nature of his work belies its inherent technical skill and universal appeal. His use of African-American subjects, employing the styles and techniques of the ancient world, suggests and provides a monumental timelessness to his figures.

Despite exhibiting regularly and being the most successful African-American artist working in the west, Johnson always found it difficult to support himself through his art. In the 1930s the Works Progress Administration (WPA) offered some hope, as Johnson was provided employment creating art for public spaces. The first of these projects was for an enormous organ screen (below), a 22 foot-long low-relief sculpture carved in redwood; it was designed for the California School of the Blind in Berkeley. When the University of California, Berkeley, later took over the property around 1980, the organ screen was de-installed and forgotten. In an incredible story that made headlines, the University sold the work--valued at one million dollars--in 2009 as abandoned surplus for \$150.00 plus tax. Two years later the Huntington Library in San Marino purchased the reliefs for what one imagines was a much higher sum.



Sargent Johnson, *Untitled (Organ Screen)*, 1937. Polychromed redwood, 22 feet in length. The Huntington Library, San Marino, California.



Sargent Johnson, *Forever Free*, 1933. Polychromed wood. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.



Sargent Johnson, *Elizabeth Gee*, 1927. Glazed Stoneware, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

In his later career, Johnson was influenced by the art of Mexico, visiting the country several times between 1945 and his death in 1967. While his experimental eclecticism may have hindered his success during his lifetime, Sargent Johnson is now viewed as a canonical figure of twentieth-century Modernism.