# UNBROKEN CIRCLE

**Exhibition of African-American Artists of the 1930's and 1940's**

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**Kenkeleba House**
**214 E. 2nd Street**
**New York, New York**
**(212) 674-3939**

COVER: Palmer Hayden, ***Virginia Teamster***, Oil on canvas, 1943

## Artists

Charles Alston
Richmond Barthé
Romare Bearden
John Biggers
Robert Blackburn
William Braxton
Selma Burke
Samuel J. Brown
Elizabeth Catlett
Claude Clark
Eldzier Cortor
Ernest Crichlow
Allan Rohan Crite
Beauford Delaney
Joseph Delaney
Richard Dempsey
Reba Dickerson-Hill
Aaron Douglas
Elton C. Fax
Charlotte White Franklin
Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller
Herbert Gentry
Rex Goreleigh
Palmer Hayden
Humbert L. Howard
Mary Howard Jennings
Wilmer A. Jennings
Malvin Gray Johnson
William H. Johnson
Lois Mailou Jones
Paul F. Keene
Jacob Lawrence
Hughie Lee-Smith
James E. Lewis
Norman Lewis
Joan Bacchus Maynard
Archibald Motley
Delilah W. Pierce
Robert S. Pious
Georgette Seabrooke Powell
Daniel Pressley
Donald R. Reid
John W. Rhoden
Charles Sebree
Thomas A. Sills
Alma W. Thomas
Dox Thrash
Masood A. Warren
James L. Wells
Charles White
Walter Williams
Ed Wilson
Ellis Wilson
John W. Wilson
Hale Woodruff

# Foreword

Ancestral legacies generally serve the purpose of nurturing the young, sustaining the spirit and providing needed continuity between the ages. Yet if these legacies are not treasured they soon disappear; therefore, they must be protected. Our cultural legacies are easily lost, if they are not cherished.

Throughout the hundreds of years of African presence on this soil, countless wealth, spiritual and material, has been lost, from the Middle Passage, through the days of Slavery and its aftermath. Exactly what must have been discarded we can only surmise, and therein lies a terrifying void.

It, therefore, fell to the second and third generations, living at the turn of the twentieth century to bridge that void and begin the process of consciously restoring and evolving the African tradition, now tempered by the experience of the West. They made the transition from artisan to artist under treacherous circumstances. They began the process of rebuilding.

These men and women were keepers of the light; their courage and endurance allowed them passage through difficult eras of history. As builders they have created a remarkable heritage. Most significant is the inspiration and encouragement they have offered younger artists. Their pride and above all the belief and integrity with which they worked offered subsequent generations a moral, intellectual and creative vision.

The nature of the Black experience has historically intruded itself, creating a unique kind of tension between the generations. It has been as difficult for the young to honor the elders, as it has been for the elders to assist the young with the realization of their dreams. Thus, this exhibition of artists who were exhibiting in the 1930's and 1940's is of particular importance. This generation of artists also gave impetus and direction to the development of Kenkeleba House.

In the *Unbroken Circle* we pay tribute to these artists. They were the promise spoken of by Alain Locke and the energy of the Harlem Renaissance and they have continued. Some who are linked within the circle will not be present with us at this tribute, but their spirit will be honored and their work, the most visible symbol of their vision, will be among that of their friends, colleagues and contemporaries. They, too, will be in our hearts and remain in our fondest memories.

Corrine Jennings
Associate Director
Kenkeleba House

The catalogue for the *Unbroken Circle* is dedicated to the memory of Samuel C. Floyd, III (February 20, 1933 - April 1, 1986). Samuel Floyd has been a member of the Board of Directors of Kenkeleba House since 1974.

# Introduction

At the beginning of the twentieth century, a small number of African American artists were working as painters and sculptors in Boston, New York and Philadelphia where the strongest traditions for art patronage in the nation had been fostered. Like most of their white counterparts in the visual arts, American artists of African ancestry saw the European art market as an important place from which to begin, so many of them went abroad to train and establish themselves in the world market before returning home. Those who remained in America were dependent on white patronage as they had little or no support systems beyond an occasional purchase of a work of art by a sympathetic member of their own families. In the main, there were no art galleries owned or operated by Blacks and few American museums had made significant purchases of works by African American Artists that encouraged them to believe that art could be a viable profession for a Black artist.

Paris, London and Rome still attracted most of the artists who went abroad and Black artists were no exception to the rule. As early as 1853, Robert S. Duncanson travelled to Rome. As a painter, he joined a group of landscape artists whose work was being nurtured in the neo-classical settings of the "eternal city" and in the later years of his life he went to England and Scotland to paint. Ten or more years later, Mary Edmonia Lewis would join "the white marmorean flock" in Rome where a group of American women sculptors had been singled out for their work in white marble. Henry O. Tanner went to Paris in 1891 and upon finding acceptance of his work set up studio and continued to paint there until his death in 1937.

The 1920's marked a significant turning point in the direction of African American art. An important circle was beginning to be formed. It began with the enterprising artists of the late nineteenth century, who, because of the problems of racism in America, had sought alternative means of keeping their art before the public in spite of the obstacles that confronted them at home. The accomplishments of the artists of the late nineteenth century served to reinforce the hopes of those pioneering painters and sculptors whose works comprise the nucleus of this exhibition which graphically illustrates the continuous art making of a circle of African American painters, printmakers and sculptors who inherited the mantle of committed artistry from Duncanson, Lewis and Tanner. The competency of their artistry underlines the flow of this, an unbroken circle that continues into our own time.

The African American artist in the twentieth century occupies a unique position in the history of American art. His sensibility about his African past remains before him and much of his artistry is influenced by the distinct patterns of culture that living in this society has fostered. But from his vantage point, he is both inside artist and outside observer of the culture at the same time. As an insider, he is genuinely American, having adopted western ways of making art that remove him from a societal place in which his art is created in the service of the community as was the art of his ancestors in Africa. Yet, in many ways, he remains an outsider to the culture he has adopted. He is seldom privy to the articulate makings of the success formulas that ensure majority culture artists the necessary support systems that allow art to thrive. As an outsider, his work is seldom included in the exhibitions that highlight mainstream trends in American art and it is even less often

included in the compendia that receive institutional support, widespread patronage and valid media promotion. However, in spite of the obstacles that have often seemed insurmountable to African American artists in the twentieth century, they have risen to the occasion and presented their work to an interested public which now includes patrons of the arts, museum professionals and those corporate services from within its own community. It is in this context that artist co-ops and alternative museum spaces have become increasingly important in filling the void that traditional museums seldom offer minority artists.

This exhibition entitled "UNBROKEN CIRCLE" honors those pioneering Black artists in the 1930's and 1940's who sought to create a climate of acceptance for their work in their own communities throughout the nation. While most of them saw New York as the desired place where art could be easily created and seen, others chose to remain in their native cities of Chicago, Washington, Altanta, San Francisco and Detroit, to mention only a few. But it was in Harlem, that city within a city, that African American artists would congregate in large numbers in the 1920's and 1930's and declare themselves a community, a circle of creative artists working toward affirming themselves as a viable group of artists and scholars in what has come to be known as the "Harlem Renaissance". Their legacy of concern for the positive definition of a Black aesthetic, which took into account the wealth of images that abound in their own communities surfaced in the art of the period. Never again would there be an outside definition of what constituted the true meaning of Blackness for these enterprising young artists.

Among the artists who forged ahead to continue the circle of concern that this exhibition fosters were Meta Warrick Fuller, that pioneering spirit who chose themes from African folktales and Black genre for exploration as subjects long before the Harlem Renaissance came about. Aaron Douglas was called by many writers "the father of African American Art" for the insightful imagery he created using the iconography of African art as primary information. He joined a host of enterprising souls whose art would significantly change the visual impact of the African American art scene as had the art of those pioneering Black painters and sculptors before them. Their dreams of having their own place in the structure of American art would not come in their lifetime. But they were instrumental in helping to set the stage for those artists who would come after them in the decades of the thirties and forties and whose artistry would enable them to receive a measure of acceptance in mainstream art circles.

While the goal of the African American artist may have been to improve his lot in life through mainstream participation in the public and municipal art centers of the nation, he never-theless, always exhibited a sense of pride in the establishment of institutions in the Black community that provided the services that an enlighted culture needs to sustain creative work. Those artists who worked in the post World War II era had few facilities beyond the meager ones offered by predominantly Black colleges and universities in the south where adequate exhibitions of their work could be arranged. The aftermath of the Harlem Renaissance showed not only the abundance of talent but it disclosed the impoverished conditions under which African Americans worked. They were first rate artists performing in the shabby facilities reserved for America's second class citizens. There existed a compelling need to render those services to the Black community that would give artists of African ancestry a chance to compete in the market place with artists of the majority culture.

The Harmon Foundation, a New York based organization, began awarding financial prizes to these artists in 1926. The Foundation received criticism from within the Black community for its patronizing way of looking at Black artists as distinctly different from other American artists and deserving of support only if they maintained a position in art which showed them to be primitive and naive. While this was not the position the Foundation took in regard to African American artists, it did little to dispel the notion that these artists were expected to ignore their American roots and create works of art that reflected their African past. Art departments established in Black institutions in the 1930's and 1940's along with community centers such as South Side Community Art Center in Chicago became the forerunner of contemporary centers that serve African American artists in principal cities throughout the nation. Some of these early models have also remained active into the 1980's.

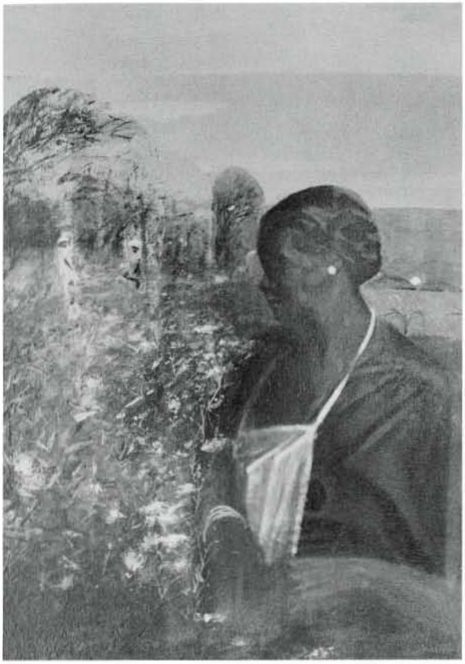
Kenkeleba House has been in existence since 1974. Importantly to the New York art community, it continues the work of serving the community while at the same time serving to reinforce the values of minority artists everywhere. Concurrently, Kenkeleba offers the services of studios for working artists, a library and visual archive for creative and scholarly inquiry and a wide range of exhibitions that highlight the work of emerging as well as established artists. It is through exhibition formats such as "UNBROKEN CIRCLE" that the spirit of service in art is revived from the legacy of the Harlem Art Center of the 1920's and 1930's and the Southside Community Art Center flows to the creative investment individuals make in the Childrens' Art Carnival in Harlem today.

The African American artist has not reached a position of self-sufficiency in the 1980's. He is still dependent upon the cooperation of fellow artists from the majority culture and those institutions that provide traditional services via corporate investment, museum purchases and municipal support to further the presentation of his own work. But much has been gained in matters of organizational ownership of facilities that serve as alternative spaces where the business of art can be conducted in an atmosphere which is caring enough to continue an important tradition, that of sharing and encouraging the unity of many artists working together for the good of art and for human understanding. With the insight that goes into the making of aesthetic statements that echo the sensibilities of its people from an historical point of view, Kenkeleba House moves closer to giving us the assurance that the UNBROKEN CIRCLE will remain intact in years to come and our heritable sensibilities within the culture will continue to be seen in the visual statements our artists make. "Will the circle be unbroken, by and by, Lord, by and by? There's a greater day a'comin . . ." Our artists wait.

David C. Driskell
Professor of Art
University of Maryland
College Park

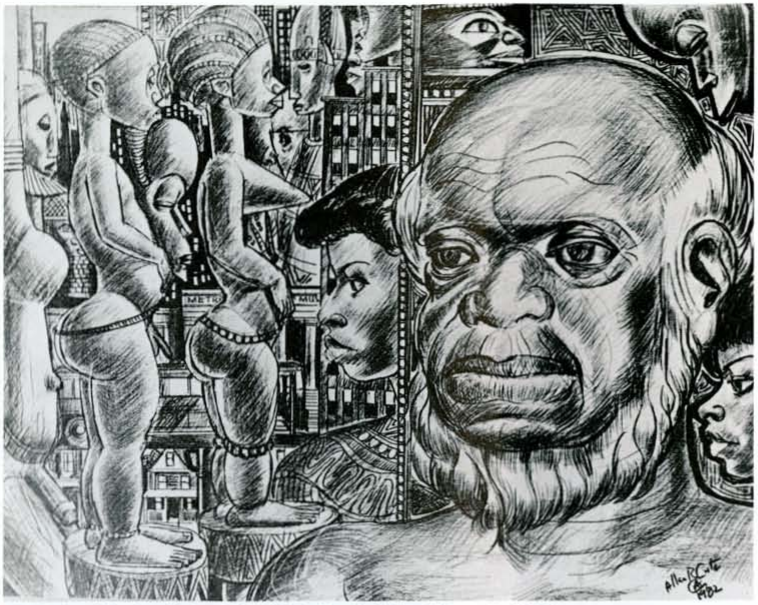
Charles Alston, ***Blues Singer #4***, Oil on canvas, 1948.

Richmond Barthé, ***Portrait Of An Unknown Woman (A'Lelia Walker)***, Pastel on paper, 1931



Ernest Crichlow, ***Lady***, Acrylic on canvas, 1980

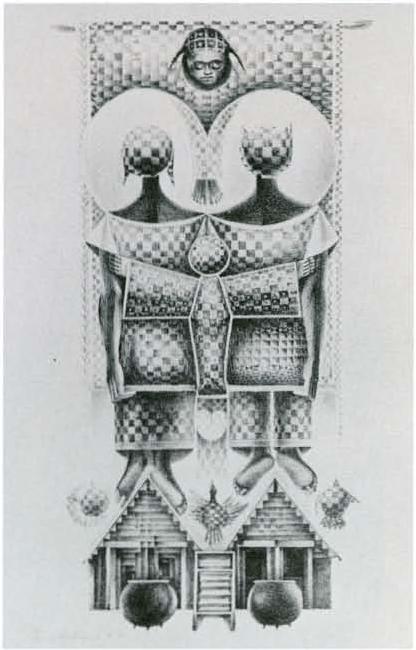
Eldzier Cortor, ***Still Life, Souvenir No. IV***, Oil on canvas, 1982



Allan Rohan Crite, ***Recollections Of A Visit To New York City***, Lithograph, 1982-85

Beuford Delaney, ***Abstraction #14***, Oil on canvas, 1963

Romare Bearden, ***Anguilla Beach***, Watercolor, 1984



John Biggers, ***Quilting Party***, Lithograph, 1981

William Braxton, ***Portrait Of A Woman***, Oil on canvas, 1911

Robert Blackburn, ***Red On Blue***, Color woodcut, 1979

Selma Burke, ***Mary McCleod Bethune***, Plaster, 1946


Samuel J. Brown, ***Two Little Girls***, Watercolor, 1945

Elizabeth Catlett, ***Cartas (Letters)***, Lithograph, 1986

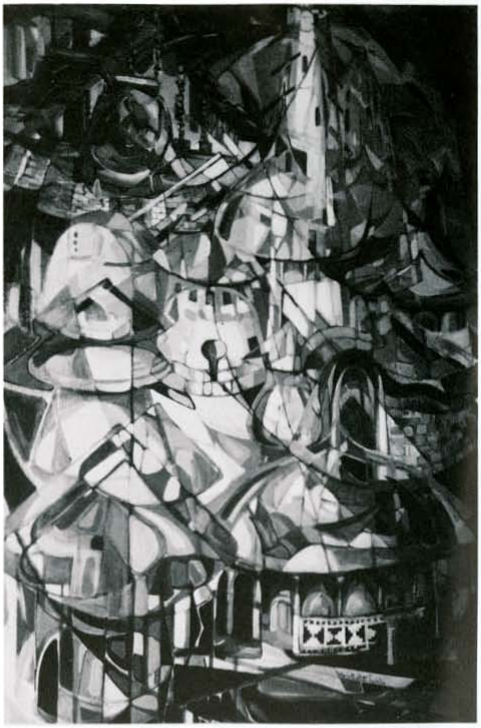
Claude Clark, ***Freedom Morning***, Oil on canvas, 1944

Richard Dempsey, ***Mamba's Daughter***, Oil on masonite, 1942

Joseph Delaney, ***Portrait***, Oil on canvas, 1964

Reba Dickerson-Hill, ***Landscape***, Sumi-e on rice paper, 1986


Aaron Douglas, ***City Scene***, Watercolor on paper, 1956



Charlotte White Franklin, ***Ancestral Homes***, Oil on canvas, 1969

Elton C. Fax, ***My Mother At Ninety***, Charcoal and pastel on toned paper, 1975

Herbert Gentry, ***Middle-Man***, Acrylic on canvas, 1977

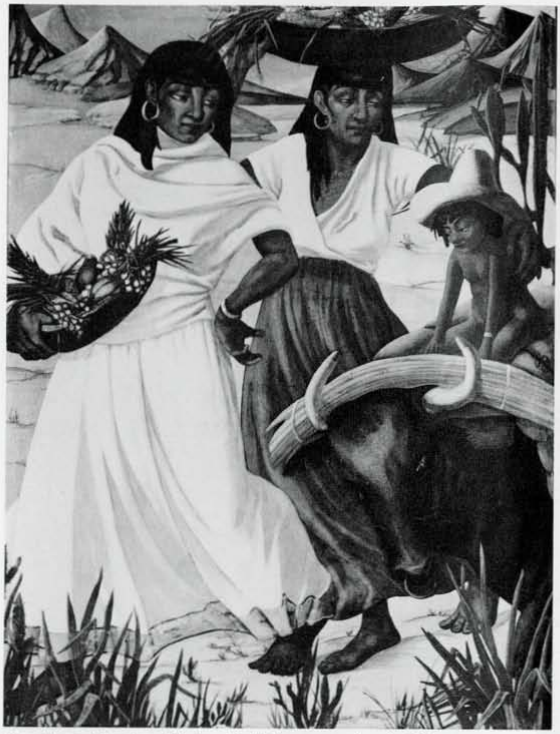
Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller, ***Pieta***, Bronze, ca. 1915

Humbert L. Howard, ***African Doll***, Watercolor, 1967

Rex Goreleigh, ***Water Pump***, Watercolor, 1981

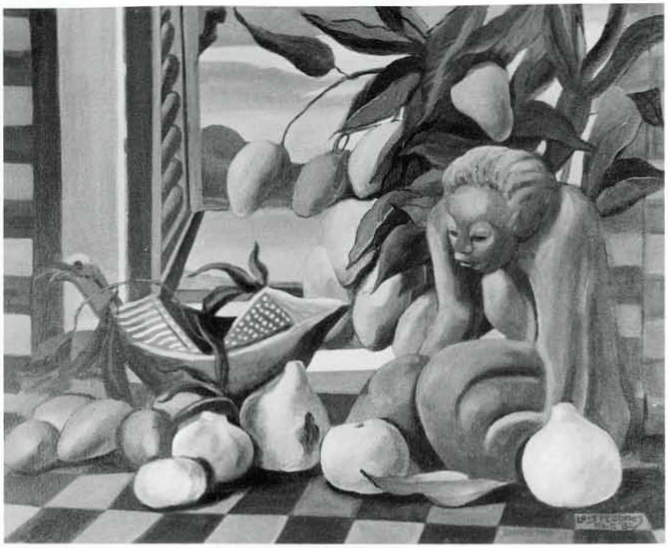
Malvin Gray Johnson, ***Negro Soldier***, Oil on canvas, 1943

William H. Johnson, ***Girl In Chair***, Handcolored linoleum block, ca. 1943

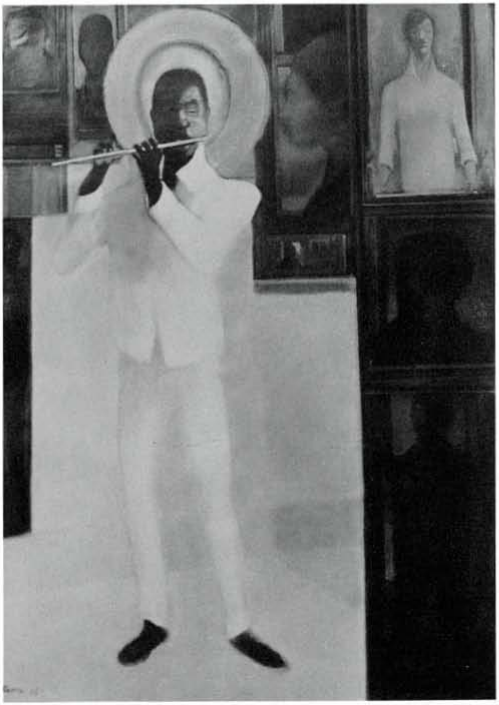


Mary Howard Jennings, ***Mexican Fruit***, Tempera on board, 1934

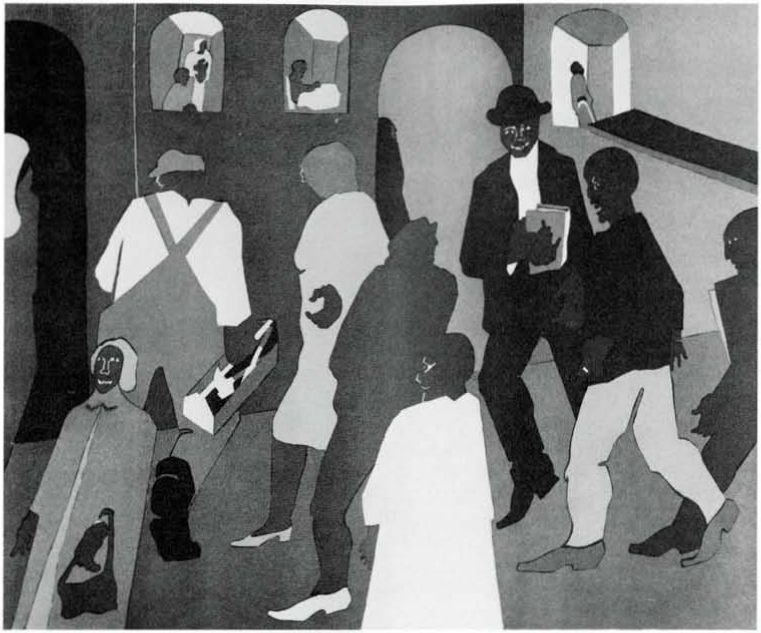
Wilmer A. Jennings, ***Just Plain Ornery***, Wood engraving, 1938



Lois Mailou Jones, ***Nature Morte Aux Mangoes***, Acrylic, 1982

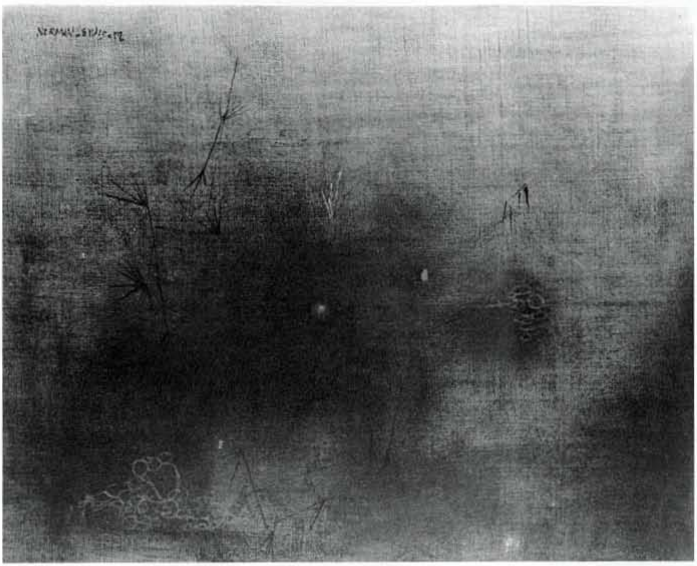


Paul F. Keene, ***Variation #2, Flute Player***, Acrylic on paper, 1985

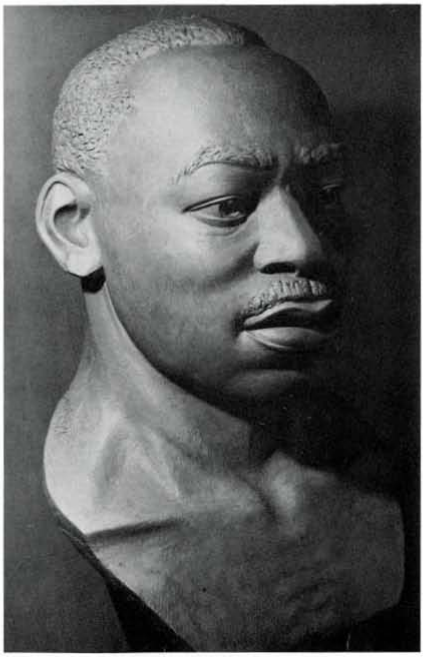


Jacob Lawrence, ***Windows***, Lithograph, 1977

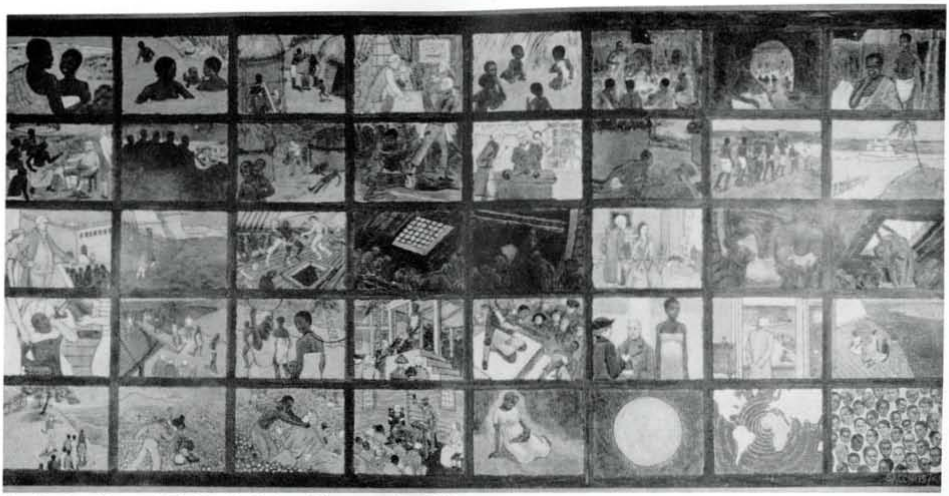
Hughie Lee-Smith, ***Soliloquist***, Oil on canvas, 1977



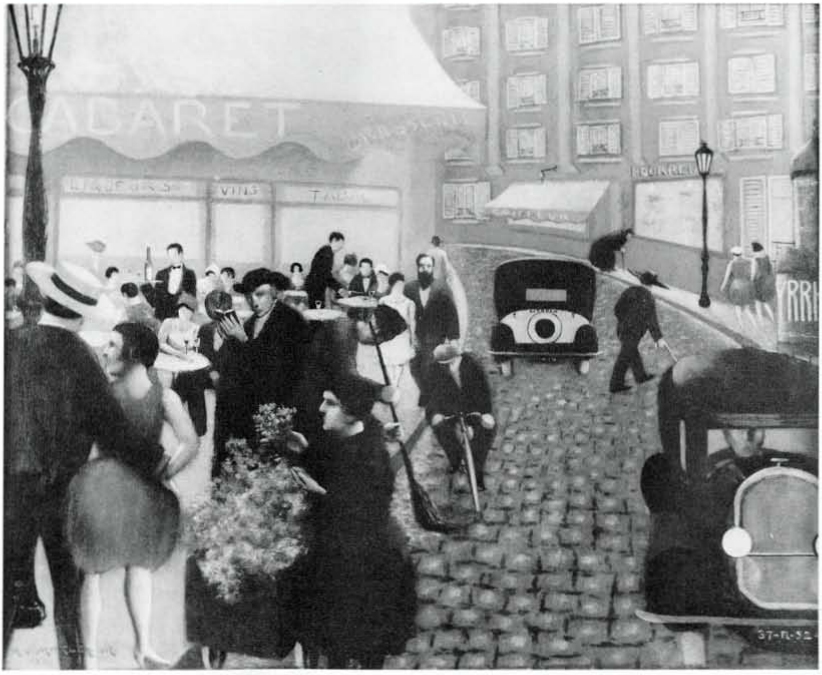
Norman Lewis, ***Unextinguishable Being***, Oil on canvas, 1952



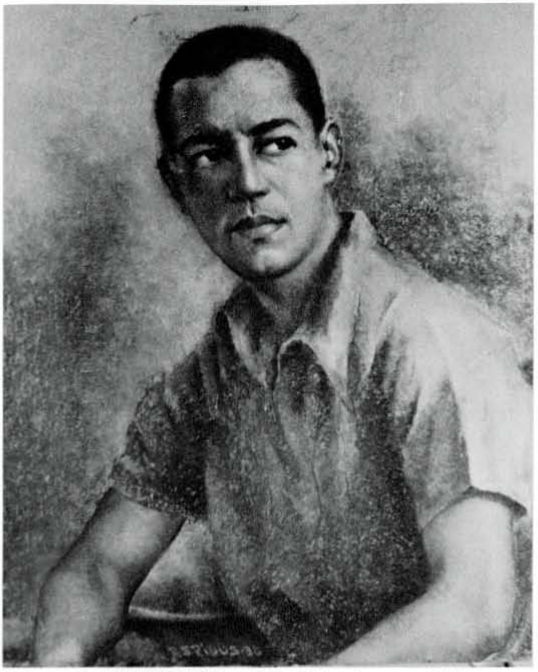
James E. Lewis, ***Martin Luther King, Jr.***, Bronze, 1985



Joan Bacchus Maynard, ***The Family Of Ama***, Oil on masonite, 1967



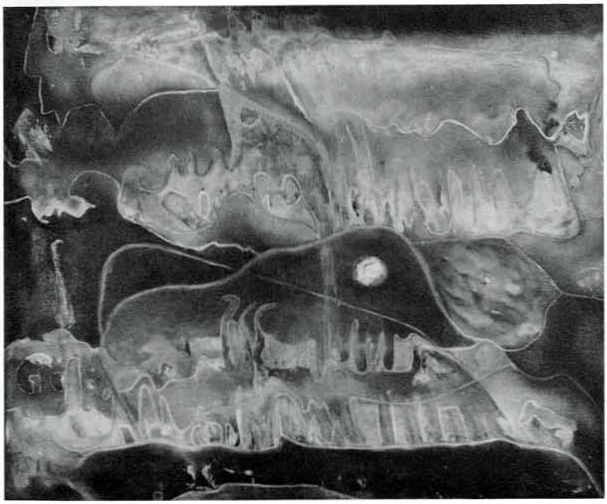

Archibald Motley, ***Dans La Rue Paris***, Oil on canvas, 1929



Robert S. Pious, ***Portrait Of Richmond Barthé***, Pastel on paper, 1938

Delilah W. Pierce, ***Harborside Mosaic***, Acrylic on canvas, 1979

Charles Sebree, ***Untitled***, Gouache and pastel on handmade paper, 1952



Thomas A. Sills, ***Desent***, Oil on canvas, 1957

Alma W. Thomas, ***The End Of Fall***, Watercolor on paper, 1964

Dox Thrash, ***Sunday Morning***, Dry point, 1950

Masood A. Warren, ***Mathew A. Henson***, Plaster, 1936

James L. Wells, ***Angel Of Peace***, Oil on canvas, 1986

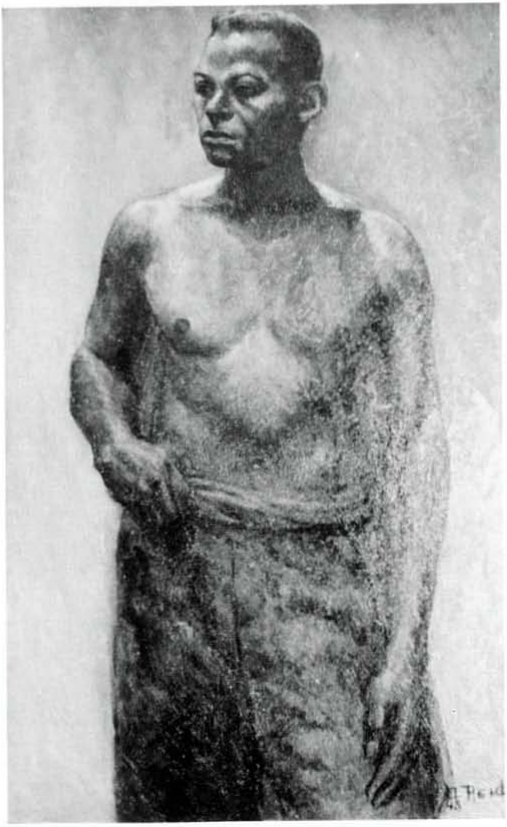
Walter Williams, ***Summer Day***, Color woodcut, 1976

Charles White, ***Head Of A Young Girl***, Charcoal on paper, 1960

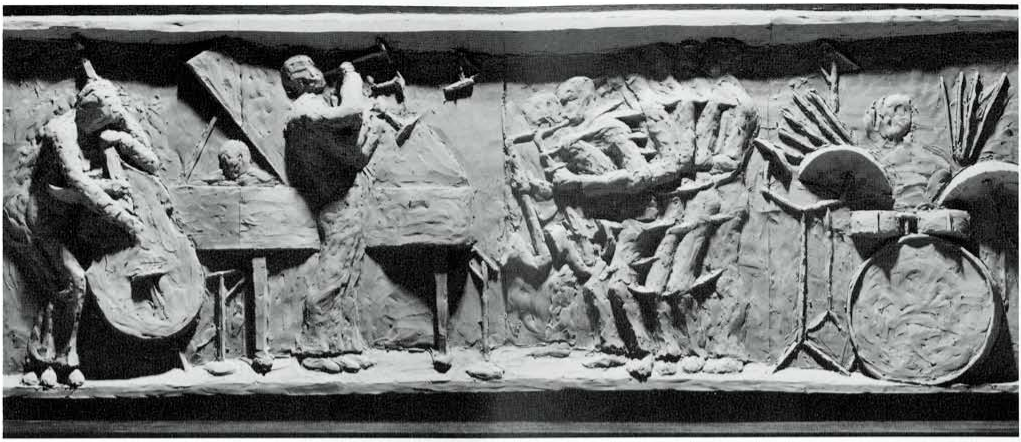
Daniel Pressley, ***Down By The River***, Wood, 1966


Georgette Seabrooke Powell, ***But For The Grace Of God***,
Mixed media, 1984

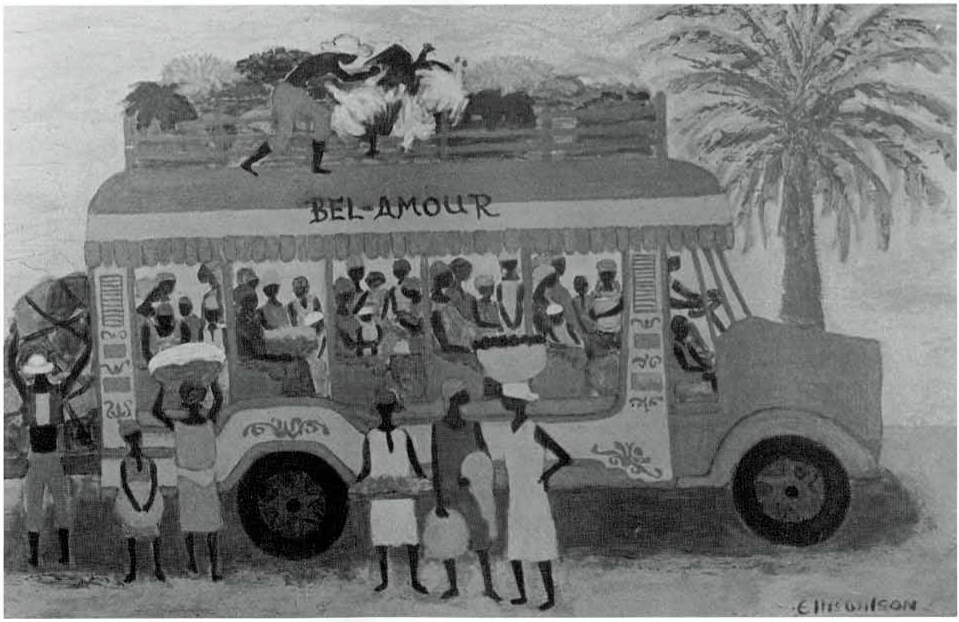
John W. Rhoden, ***Gemini***, Rosewood, 1947



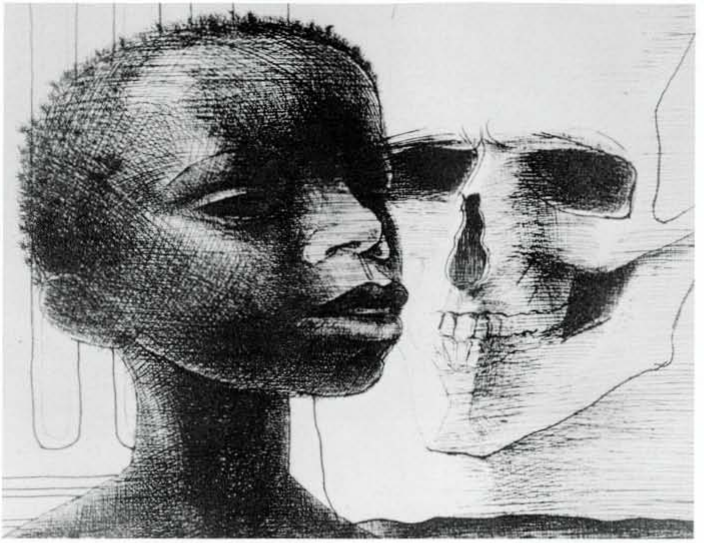
Donald R. Reid, ***The Negro Worker***, Oil on canvas, 1945



Ed Wilson, ***Jazz Musicians***, Macquette, plastilene, 1982




Ellis Wilson, ***Haitian Camion***, Oil on masonite, ca. 1953



John W. Wilson, ***Dialogue***, Etching, 1973

Hale Woodruff, ***Blue Landscape, II***, Oil on canvas, 1974

## Next to the Last Word

As a young art student in the early fifites, the only book I could find about the African-American's place in art history was James Porter's *Modern Negro Art* (1943). This book became my Bible. The people in it were larger than life to me. Sometimes I wondered, if these legends really existed. When I was asked to be one of the curators of this exhibition, it occured to me that many of the artists mentioned in Porter's book I've come to know quite well.

Ernie Crichlow, Joan Maynard, Jacob Lawrence and Dan Pressley were part of the beginning of the Fulton Art Fair which now is going into its thirtieth year. Recently Sam Brown said to me, "Find yourself an older artist to learn from." Dan Pressley, the first wood carver I ever knew, served that function for me in the fifties. During those years, Jacob Lawrence and I often strolled the streets of Bedford Stuyvesant at night on our way to the Baby Grand. Jake, Norman Lewis and Hale Woodruff, major artists and also teachers, would talk to us about our work; they were very accessible and full of encouragement. Many artists during this period gave generously of their time and talent. Comradery, dialogue and lots of parties were the norm.

Many artists were traveling in the fifites. Ellis Wilson, Eldzier Cortor and Lois Mailou Jones worked and lived in Haiti. I missed Beauford Delaney by half an hour as he departed for Paris in 1953. Romare Bearden and Paul Keene also went to Paris. "Ole Pompidou" is a nickname I gave Herb Gentry because he has lived in Paris longer than any other artist I know. He went back after the war and opened a jazz club/restaurant behind the Dome cafe in the artists' district of Montparnasse. In 1978, Herb, my wife Cynthia and I visited Beauford Delaney in the St. Anne Hospital in Paris.

Before he left for Europe, Walter Williams and I shared a studio on Twenty-sixth Street in Manhattan. We hung around the Brooklyn Museum and used to go to Hans Hoffman's School, the Whitney Museum (then located on Eighth Street), sometimes to the Cedar Bar where the Abstract Expressionist painters hung out, and the Five Spot. 1954 was the year Walter went to Skowhegan and Charlie "Yardbird" Parker walked into our studio and became part of the Village scene. I visited Walter in Copenhagen in 1978; even after twenty-five years he was the same Walt. The Danes are famous for their furniture and palaces. There is a Christiansborg Palace in Denmark and one with the same name in Accra, Ghana. That's because the Danes were in West Africa before the English and the Portugese. Ironically, that is where W.E.B. Dubois is buried.

I became familiar with other artists, like Wilmer Jennings, Charles Sebree, Alma Thomas and James Wells, through another major source on African-American Art: Cedric Dover's *American Negro Art* (1960). Life during these years in Greenwich Village and the Lower East Side was stimulating and besides artists, I met writers, musicians, and philosophers. Charlie White I used to see at the ACA Gallery. Other artists I

met through SPIRAL, an organization formed in the early sixties to give more visibility to African-American artists. There were afternoons spent with Charlie Alston visiting galleries on Fifty-seventh Street. I met Romare Bearden during this time. He was part of SPIRAL and along with Norman Lewis and Ernie Crichlow, founded Cinque Gallery in 1969. Both Romare Bearden and Jake Lawrence are having retrospectives this year. Both exhibitions will travel the United States and Romie's may go to Europe, and I understand they are doing a film on Jake.

Festac '77, was a reunion of sorts, in Africa, among Black artists from all over the world: seventy-thousand people from 56 countries. Ed Wilson and Ernie Crichlow and I tramped all over Lagos, Nigeria, checking out the markets and the films at the National Theatre. A number of artists visited a Yoruba shrine in Ibadan where we were given new names. Seeing Bob Blackburn walking on the streets of New York, one would not think that he founded and directs an internationally famous printmaking workshop; Bob looks like one of those "Griots" seen in Africa.

Talking with the artists in the course of preparing this exhibition has been very delightful. I've had the opportunity to renew old friendships, share marvelous stories and I have had some very interesting experiences.

Sam Brown, an artist of energy and wit, insists on being called after midnight. During the day he works at the Brandywine Workshop, then he goes home to work until five in the morning on his watercolors. When I call Sam, he is full of conversation and raring to go. He discusses interesting details of his life and activities in Philadelphia. Chatting with another Philadelphia artist, Reba Dickerson-Hill, I found out that she was honored by that City's Mayor and will shortly be included in the book, *Who's Who: The Encyclopedia of Sumi-e*. Humbert Howard regaled me with stories. He was Art Director of the Pyramid Club in Philadelphia—an organization of five hundred men of the Black elite, doctors, lawyers, and judges—during the fifties. He used to make frequent trips to New York City to pick-up the work of Romare Bearden, Charles Alston, Hale Woodruff and other artists for exhibitions at the Club. These days, Humbert has a painting in an exhibition at the Governor's Mansion.

Joe Delaney is a rare breed—part Bohemian gentleman—part rebel, and truly a free spirit. He has always felt that artists should not be categorized by race, but understands the importance of exhibitions like these for young people. When I visited Joe he was having a measure of success and amid paintings all over the place, books, catalogues, antiques, stretchers, frames and assorted things, we chatted. Fifty of his paintings had just been moved out for a retrospective; still there was no room to move around. He offered us refreshments and proceeded to hold forth and taste. Needless to say, we left there feeling good, exiting to strains of the "Big Legged Woman Blues."

Allan Crite is a fascinating, insightful and scholarly man who has visited China, and is scheduled to return in a few months. He talked about the fifty-six different languages spoken among the National Minorities in China. He also mentioned that in Peking there are a number of bookstores dedicated to information on Black Americans. Crite creates religious murals and has written books on religious subjects. These contain exquisite brush drawings and an illustrated glossary of terms explaining the symbols in the drawings.

When I visited Masood Ali Warren in his "crammed to the rafters" studio, he took me through one room at a time and explained each painting and sculpture in detail. Several were of famous personalities like W.C. Handy, Duke Ellington, Count Basie and Mathew Henson. He told me how they met and where he made their busts. Several were done backstage at the Apollo Theater.

Visiting Thomas Sills' house in Greenwich Village was enchanting. His late wife was a ceramacist and the house was full of her ceramics and his paintings. He and his wife collected many paintings of the Abstract Expressionists which they donated to Tougaloo College in Mississippi. Sills says his inspiration comes from growing up in North Carolina where he worked in a florist shop, which one can see in the delicacy of the colors and beauty in the brushstrokes. He and his wife used to travel abroad every summer. He told me about experiences in Russia and South America and indeed some of his paintings look like rain forests.

The "Dean" of Black sculptors, Richmond Barthé is represented by a drawing in this exhibition; at this stage his work is very difficult to procure. But Elizabeth Catlett, James Lewis, John Rhoden and Ed Wilson represent the full spectrum of modern sculptors who work in all types of materials—stone, metal, steel, bronze, or wood—and who have done numerous public commissions. Ed Wilson, for instance, designed the entire John F. Kennedy Memorial Park in Binghamton, New York.

Eldzier Cortor's sense of humor and Hughie Lee-Smith's courtly manner are things one remembers, but these fellows are also draughtsmen who take great pride in their work. Elton Fax agreed to participate in this exhibition just before he left to vacation near the Baltic Sea where his most recent book is being published. Elton is another artist with some incredible stories to tell.

These living legends stepped out of James Porter's book and have enriched our lives. In evaluating the oeuvre and achievements that these artists have given us, it is clear that from the earliest Griots in Africa, who spun tales and wove dreams like Aesop, to our present constellation of artists—though circumvented at every turn, the UNBROKEN CIRCLE remains and moves towards a consecration.

Vincent D. Smith
Curator

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Kenkeleba House programs whether in the exhibition of visual arts, in arts exposure programs for community children, in literary or interdisciplinary programs are always centered in the development of the Lower East Side community and its historic role in nuturing the creative in American culture.

Kenkeleba House provides an alternative environment for artists, known and less well known

The name, Kenkeleba, is derived from that of a plant grown in Senegambia and known for its spiritual and nutritional value.



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