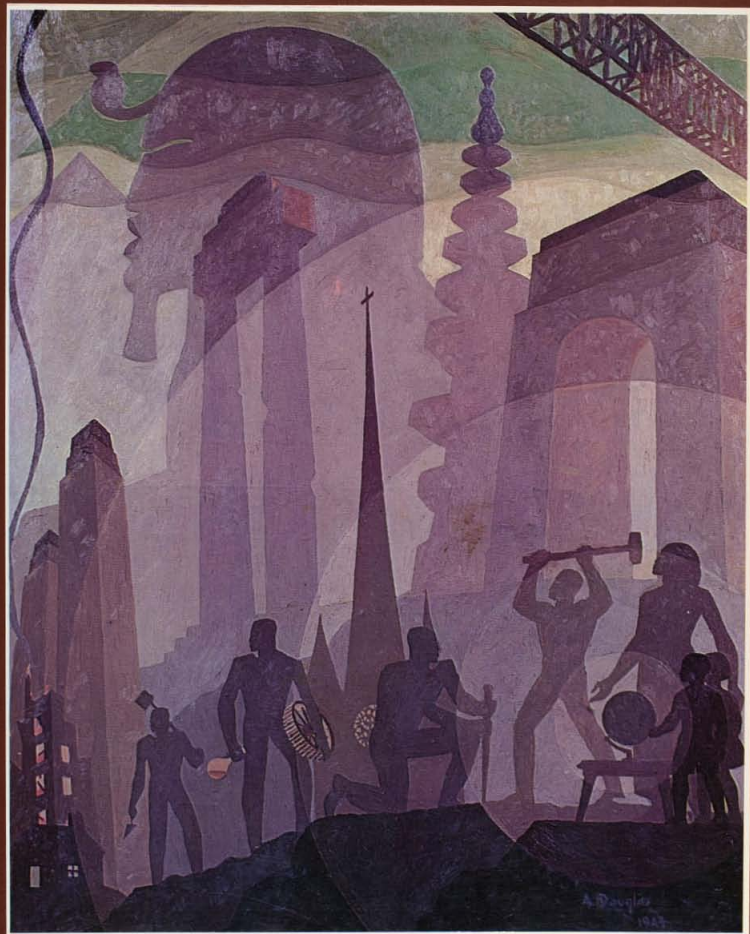


Two Centuries of Black American Art



[Cover]

Aaron Douglas (b. 1898)

Building More Stately Mansions, 1944

Oil on canvas

54 × 42 in. (121.9 × 91.5 cm.)

Department of Art, Fisk University

Two Centuries of Black American Art

01/02
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Two Centuries of Black American Art

David C. Driskell

With catalog notes by
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Binghamton
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The Brooklyn Museum are happily recognized. On the staff of the organizing museum at Los Angeles, where a great many individuals have given special support to the guest curator, particular gratitude is extended to Jeanne D'Andrea, Head of Exhibitions and Publications; Nancy Grubb, catalog editor; Kristen McCormick of the registrar's office; Head Conservator Benjamin B. Johnson; and Museum Head Photographer Edward Cornachio. Ms. Madelyn Mayo, museum intern on a Smithsonian Fellowship, has also provided admirable assistance. Many others on the staffs of the four exhibiting museums will be intimately involved in the exhibition's actual installation. To them, warmest advance thanks as this catalog goes to press months in advance of the culmination of many efforts.

A final acknowledgment must be made in the instance of the late Claude Booker. Founder of the Black Arts Council and a former staff member of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Mr. Booker long insisted that an exhibition not unlike *Two Centuries of Black American Art* come to pass.

R. A. S.

Foreword

The black contribution to the cultural heritage of our nation has too often been overlooked and unrecognized. But black artists, from America's beginning, have made a profound contribution to American art history.

Philip Morris Incorporated is proud to be a sponsor of "Two Centuries of Black American Art," the first major historical survey of black involvement in America's cultural accomplishments.

This unique and stimulating exhibition of paintings, sculpture, graphics and architectural and decorative art objects serves to remind us once again of the diversity, aesthetic quality, and humanistic strength of black creative efforts through the centuries.

The fact that black artists and crafts people were able to make such a creative contribution—despite deprivation and adversity—should be an inspiration to us all in this national bicentennial era.

We hope audiences are pleased and challenged by this exhibition. We are grateful to Professor David Driskell of Fisk University for his counsel in selecting the works that are presented here. And we extend our thanks to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art for its cooperation and assistance in mounting the exhibition for the public to enjoy.

Joseph F. Cullman 3rd
Chairman, Philip Morris Incorporated

Introduction

Black is neither a true color nor an entirely apt word in the title for this exhibition. The artists represented were not selected because of their African ancestry alone, however direct or mixed, but to consider how this has obscured their contributions to American art history. And so it is not mere skin color that gives this survey a unity although it is true that many of the artists represented underwent uniquely personal torments because of a majority society's prejudices. Some escaped through exile: Edmonia Lewis to Rome, Henry O. Tanner to Paris, William H. Johnson to Denmark. But a larger number did not or could not. One revelation of this present assemblage is that the human creative impulse can triumph in the face of impossible odds, and at times perhaps even because of them.

One irony that tends to bear this out was an episode endured by Edward Bannister. After he had submitted his *Under the Oaks* for exhibit at the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition, it won a bronze medal. But the artist himself was nearly denied admission to the gallery displaying his work, because of his color. We are told also that Tanner's embitterment with America derived from the recognition he received not as an artist, but as a black artist, a kind of racial anomaly. The real anomaly is that our society, with few exceptions, has taken so long to recognize these gifted Americans who have strengthened the cultural fabric that cloaks and therefore enriches us all.

For those who know black American art only through contemporary exhibitions of the past decade, it will come as a surprise that

so many earlier artists did not reflect "the black experience" in their subject matter. But from their portraits of whites, biblical scenes, and landscapes that have affinities with Cole and Durand, it seems that staying close to the mainstream of American art was a way for black artists to find acceptance and commissions. Perhaps this conformity (or better, sublimation) was in itself another kind of "black experience."

This exhibition, although the largest of its type held thus far, is hardly complete. An endless regret is that many black American works have vanished, or lack documentation. Even in our own times there are few public museums with appreciable collections of black American art. Hopefully this does not reflect conscious bias as much as it does unawareness. Lamentably rare, also, are American art texts or biographical dictionaries that list even a few of the names encountered in this exhibition and catalog. One can at least be grateful that in our century pioneer institutions such as the Harmon Foundation; Atlanta, Fisk, and Howard universities; the Schomburg Collection of the New York Public Library; and the Frederick Douglass Institute, Museum of African Art, among others, began serious efforts to end the anonymity of these American artists and to encourage public awareness and appreciation of their achievements.

Although the exhibition includes a number of important works that have not, until now, been seen by a large public, there are still regrettable gaps. In some instances owners were reluctant to lend; in others, surviving

works were deemed too fragile to travel. We have already noted that some may be lost forever, including Tanner's original *Daniel in the Lions' Den*, of which a later version by his hand is in the exhibition.

This exhibition and its catalog represent extensive research, negotiation, selection, and thought by Professor David C. Driskell, chairman of the Department of Art at Fisk University. An artist himself, he is an acknowledged authority on black American art and his university is a leading repository. Assisted by Leonard Simon, Professor Driskell was presented with a mandate when invited to serve as guest curator of this exhibition: to locate a broad-ranged group of works reflecting the efforts of the more significant black American artists from slave times into the mid-twentieth century. There are some exceptions: works by living artists who, although active before 1950, asked to be represented by later examples.

When the concept of this exhibition was first generated, initial research revealed a paucity of serious literature on black American art. Part of this mandate to Professor Driskell therefore included the preparation of a catalog text capable of filling a void that has existed too long. Quite apart from its direct relationship to the exhibition and its contribution to the literature, we hope that this publication will stimulate further research and scholarship that will give us a more complete history of American art.

The Museum expresses particular appreciation to nearly one hundred lenders whose names appear on page 6. Their willingness to part with

treasured possessions for more than a year, permitting scores of thousands of museum visitors to see them in Los Angeles, Atlanta, Dallas, and Brooklyn, represents both admirable generosity and welcome enthusiasm for this project. *Two Centuries of Black American Art* could not have been organized and presented without substantial assistance from the National Endowment for the Humanities and Philip Morris Incorporated. This combination of government and corporate support has provided vital succor for the exhibition, this catalog, and a variety of related educational activities.

Rexford Stead
Deputy Director
Los Angeles County Museum of Art

John Rhoden

b. 1918

Sculptor. Born in Birmingham, Alabama. Studied at the School of Painting and Sculpture, Columbia University, New York; and under Hugo Robus, Oronzio Maldarelli, Richmond Barthé, William Zorach. Executed commissions for the Harlem Hospital (*Monumental Bronze*, 1966) and the Metropolitan Hospital (*Monumental Abstraction*, 1968). Visited more than twenty countries as an artist on tour through the Department of State.

Major Exhibitions: Fisk University, Nashville, 1969; The Frick Collection, New York, 1969; Brooklyn College, 1969; Atlanta University, 1970; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1970; Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia, 1970; Art Institute of Chicago, 1970; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 1970; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 1971; National Academy of Arts and Letters, American Academy of Arts and Letters, New York, 1971; Schneider Galleria, Rome, 1971; Fairweather-Harden Gallery, Chicago, 1971; Audubon Annual, 1971; Saidenberg Gallery, New York, 1971; American Academy, Rome, 1971; Howard University Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 1971; Camino Gallery, Rome, 1971; Brooklyn College, 1971; University of Pittsburgh, 1971.

"Sculpture has to have a form, it has to have some movement, something to excite you one way or the other. When I look at sculpture, I wonder, what is it that that fellow has done that I can get something out of." In his home, which also serves as his studio, there are many



pieces in varying styles that show Rhoden to be very aware of both the classic and romantic elements of art. He is a brilliantly skillful craftsman in metal, whose work always reveals his keen eye for the nature and possibilities of the material, captivating the viewer with its richness.

1. Taped interview with Leonard Simon, November 1975.

166 Safari, 1958

Bronze

27 x 38 in. (68.6 x 96.5 cm.)

Collection of the artist

167 Population Explosion, 1962

Teakwood

h: 60 in. (152.4 cm.)

Collection of the artist

168 Confrontation, 1969

Bronze

h: 96 in. (243.8 cm.)

Collection of the artist

169 Abstraction, 1975

Bronze, jewel glass

h: 48 in. (121.9 cm.)

Collection of the artist

170 Richandi, 1975

Bronze

h: 90 in. (228.6 cm.)

Collection of the artist

171 Sphere of Life, 1975

Bronze

48 x 60 in. (121.9 x 152.4 cm.)

Collection of the artist