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Lois Jones Peirre-Noel

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Black Women In the Visual Arts

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A Comparative Study

By Lois Jones Pierre-Noel

The strength and position of the Black woman artist has existed as an important contribution from the early history of Black American artists. Women artists emerged from a most discouraging beginning in this country to attain remarkable achievements. For to be both "Black" and "woman" was to express one's creativity in "frustrating obscurity." Then, too, art history books failed to mention Black women artists before the middle of the 19th Century.

From the mid-1800s to the 20th Century, the more significant contributions of Black women artists were made by those who traveled abroad for the recognition the American society was not willing to give. Outstanding in this group was Edmonia Lewis, one of the most vibrant personalities of her time. Born in New York in 1845, Lewis became the first Black woman sculptor. Liberal abolitionists were responsible for her education at Oberlin College (1859-1863), followed by specialized work in sculpture in the studio of Edmond Brckett, in Boston.

She first attracted attention in 1865 when she exhibited in Boston a bust of Robert Gould Shaw. That same year she was sent by patrons to Rome, where she perfected her work in the fashionable neo-classical style of the day until her death in 1890.

Henry Tuckerman, a leading American art historian of the late 19th Century, referred to Edmonia Lewis as "the most exotic and interesting of all the young American artists in Rome." Among her most noted creations is "Forever Free," which she executed in marble in Rome in 1867 as a tribute to the Emancipation Proclamation. It is now in the permanent collection of the Howard University Gallery of Art. Other important works of marble are: "Hagar," 1875; "Madonna and Child," 1867, and "The Marriage of Hiawatha,"

"Forever Free," by Edmonia Lewis



On returning to the States, she executed—mostly in plaster—a number of portrait bust commissions, among them Charles Sumner, Wendell Phillips, Harriet Homer, Charlotte Cushman, and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow—which is now in the Harvard University College Library.

Ranked along with Edmonia Lewis is Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller, whom I knew when I was a student in Boston. She was indeed a great inspiration to me. After five years of study at the School of Industrial Art in Philadelphia, she went to Paris in 1899 to study at the Academie Colorosi, where she attracted the attention of Auguste Rodin, the great French sculptor. In 1903 she exhibited, in the Paris Salon, a group entitled "The Wretched," which were considered her masterpieces. After three years in Paris, she returned to the States.

Most of Fuller's early works were destroyed in a studio fire in Philadelphia in 1910. Among the remaining are "Ethiopian Awakening," (now in the 135th Street Public Library in Harlem) "The Talking Skull," "The Exodus," and "Richard B. Harrison."

In an effort to gain recognition as artists, Lewis and Fuller chose to live outside the Black community, as did Robert Duncanson and Henry O. Tanner. Their wish was to be regarded as "artists," without regard to race. Consequently, with a few exceptions, they avoided subjects relating entirely to the Black experience.

Unlike Fuller, May Howard Jackson, also a sculptor, had no desire to study abroad and confined her study to the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts. Her resultant works were excellent examples of calculated modeling in the tradition of American pictorial sculpture.

In contrast to Jackson, sculptor Nancy Elizabeth Prophet, of Warwick, R.I., chose to study at the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris, after completing her work at the Rhode Island School of Design. There she resided from 1922 to 1935 and attracted much attention by her strongly featured

portraits of Black characters in wood. "Congolaise" was one of her major works to be purchased by the Whitney Museum in New York for its permanent collection.

Augusta Savage decided early in life to succeed in the field of sculpture. It was not an easy road for her but, possessing great genius and strong ambition, she left her home in Green Cove Spring, Fla., for New York to further her education. She was a scholarship student for three years at Cooper Union and, in 1923, applied for and was granted a scholarship to study at Fontainebleau in France. But Savage never realized the benefits from this scholarship because, on learning that she was Black, the American Scholarship Committee withdrew the scholarship. She did, however, later receive a Rosenwald scholarship for a two-year study in Paris. Her sculpture, "Gamin," a study of the head of a Black boy was responsible for the great recognition she received—along with the expressive head of W. E. B. Dubois—now in the 135th Street New York Public Library.

Another of Savage's achievements was her creation of the sculpture: "The Harp" [inspired by the Black national anthem "Lift Every Voice and Sing"] which she was commissioned to do in 1939 for the New York World's Fair. Many American galleries exhibited her work, among them the Anderson Galleries, the Argent Gallery and the Architectural League of New York.

It was during this period in the 1920s that the Black artist began to gain self-definition through the expression of group consciousness in the "Negro Renaissance" or the "New Negro Movement." Alain Locke, editor of the *New Negro Anthology*, was indeed responsible for reawakening Black Americans to their African past and the richness of their heritage. This movement centered in Harlem, to where a large number of Black peasants and laborers fled to escape a bitter life of poverty in the South after World War I. In art, this action of self-expression took place in music, drama, dance, literature and the visual arts. The great personalities of the period included,

Bessie Smith and Louis Armstrong in music; Claude McKay, Langston Hughes and James Weldon Johnson in literature; May Howard Jackson, Augusta Savage and Laura Wheeler Waring in art. Waring, a proficient painter who taught at Cheney State Teachers College in Pennsylvania, was commissioned by the Harmon Foundation to do [along with Betsy Graves Reyneau] a series of portraits of outstanding Americans of African descent.

The Harmon Foundation of New York was greatly instrumental in providing Black artists with exposure and rewards for their work. So was the collector Arthur A. Schomburg, then curator of the Department of Negro Literature, History and Prints at the 135th Street Branch of the New York Public Library. His large collection of art, which resulted from his promotion of public exhibits and lectures, was donated to the library.

Other agencies and institutions which paved the way for Black artists to develop their skills and display their art include, the Bennett Aden Gallery, founded by Alonzo Aden and James V. Herring (then head of the Howard University Art Department), and the Atlanta University Art Award Shows, under the sponsorship of Hale Woodruff.

Some of the women artists who flourished during this era include, Elizabeth Catlett, sculptor and print-maker, who now lives in Mexico, and Selma Burke, also a sculptor residing in Bucks County, New Hope, Pa. Catlett, a graduate of Howard University, won top award for her sculpture, "Mother and Child," at the Negro Exposition in Chicago in 1940. She works mainly in wood—cedar and walnut. Her themes are politically designed in keeping with her statement that "art is important only to the extent that it helps in the liberation of our people." She is due to retire soon from her position as professor of sculpture and department head at the National School of Fine Arts of the National University of Mexico.

Selma Burke was born at Mooreville, N.C., where at an early age she began to

14 fashion nursery rhyme subjects from local clay which was used as a wash for farm buildings. Her formal education includes studies at St. Augustine's College, Cooper Union and Columbia University. Later, she went to Europe on a fellowship.

Burke has won numerous awards and has fulfilled several important commissions for the federal government. The relief portrait head of President Roosevelt on the 10-cent coin is her work. She is the founder of the half-million dollar Selma Burke Art Center at Bucks County, Pittsburgh, Pa.

Samella Lewis, professor of Oriental Art History at Scripps College, Claremont, Cal., and co-author with Ruth Waddy of Volumes I and II of *Black Artists on Art*, is founder-editor of the Contemporary Crafts Publishing Company in Los Angeles. Another artist of note is Margaret Burroughs, illustrator/printmaker and founder-director of the DuSable Museum in Chicago.

Evangeline Montgomery specializes in metal craft, photography and weaving, and serves as ethnic art consultant to the Oakland Museum. She is also active as a consultant and selects and organizes Black art exhibits and research material.

A New Era

With the coming of the "Black Revolution" of the late 1960s came the "Black Art Movement." It is significant to note that a few years ago it would have been unthinkable to segregate the work of Black artists and exhibit them out of context with other contemporary works. But today, Black art shows are presented nationwide in an effort to rectify what has long been a serious social injustice.

Some of these exhibitions center around such themes as: "Afro-American Women in Art: Their Achievements in Sculpture and Painting," recorded at the Whitney Museum in 1972; "A New Vitality in Art: The Black Woman," which was presented at Mt. Holyoke College in 1972. The following year, Morgan State College [now a university] in Baltimore featured four

women, Laura Wheeler Waring, Elizabeth Catlett, Alma Thomas, and this writer, in an exhibition entitled, "Black Matri-Images," organized by Professor James E. Lewis.

An organization of Black women artists in New York called "Where We At"—headed by Kay Brown—exhibited at the Bedford-Stuyvesant Restoration Corporation in Brooklyn, and at Gallery 1199, the show: "The Black Woman: Genesis of a New Nation." One of the 1975 shows, "In New York," at the Women's Interart Center, in May, marked the first attempt to indicate certain specific directions and trends in the art of Black women. Faith Ringgold, a strong leader for the rights of Black artists, served as curator for the show. Ringgold is recognized for her early but outstanding canvases geared to portray the injustices, hypocrisies, and indignities endured by the Black man in this country.

Among the Black women artists whose works have been exhibited widely are: Betye Saar and Alma Thomas, both of whom had solo shows at the Whitney Museum in New York, and Ellen Banks, a member of the Boston Museum School faculty, whose paintings and constructions are abstract in style; Delilah Pierce and Malkia (Lucille Roberts), of Washington, whose travels to Africa have greatly influenced their style and direction of work; Tex Nash, also of Washington, whose recent exhibition of strong, picturesque portrayals of Black women and woven tapestries at the Holston Gallery in Washington was a great success.

Also, Georgia Jessup, Georgette Powell and Star Bullock, the latter who exhibited three of her newest pieces in "The American Painters in Paris" exhibition at the Palais des Congnes, from December 15, 1965 to February 16, 1976; Vivian Brown, and Betty Blayton, founder-director of the Children's Art Carnival in Harlem, who are highly esteemed in New York, and Valerie Maynard, a talented sculptor who last year took a three-year traveling exhibition of her works to Sweden, and Carole Byard, who works out of a studio

in New York's Greenwich Village, and whose work is included in the presentation of "Paintings by Five Black Women Artists," at the Howard University Gallery of Art in January, 1976.

Geraldine McCullough, a Chicago sculptor, created the controversial monument of Dr. Martin Luther King. This work in bronze, which stands seven-and-a-half feet, bears the face of Dr. King, but is typical of Benin [West African] sculpture in the form of a king clad in ceremonial dress. It stands in front of the Dr. Martin Luther King Plaza apartment building in Chicago.

Among a group of 10 Chicago artists organized by Jeff Donaldson (present chairman of the Department of Art at Howard University) called "Africobra," meaning: African Commune of Bad Relevant Artists, are two women of distinction: Barbara Jones, who teaches at Malcolm X College, and Carolyn Lawrence. Their art may be classified as "Propaganda Art" and truly "Black Art" aimed to reflect the Black experience and to preserve the African heritage.

Other nationally acclaimed artists include, Yvone Carter, who is on the Art faculty of Federal City College, Martia Lloyd, Yvonne Olf, Harriet Kennedy and Suzanne Jackson, who is primarily "self-taught," and whose watercolors deal with reality versus fantasy expressed in a mood bordering on surrealism. Some of her work can be found in the Hirshhorn Collection and in other galleries and collections in the West Coast, especially in Los Angeles.

Younger talents who bear watching are Rose Auld, Wendy Wilson and Adrienne Hoard.

It is gratifying to witness the increasing number of Black women artists throughout the United States whose works show a wide variety of styles and directions which signify their ability to cope with the best of world art. □

Professor Lois Jones Peirre-Noel teaches design and watercolor painting at Howard University.

Edmonia Lewis

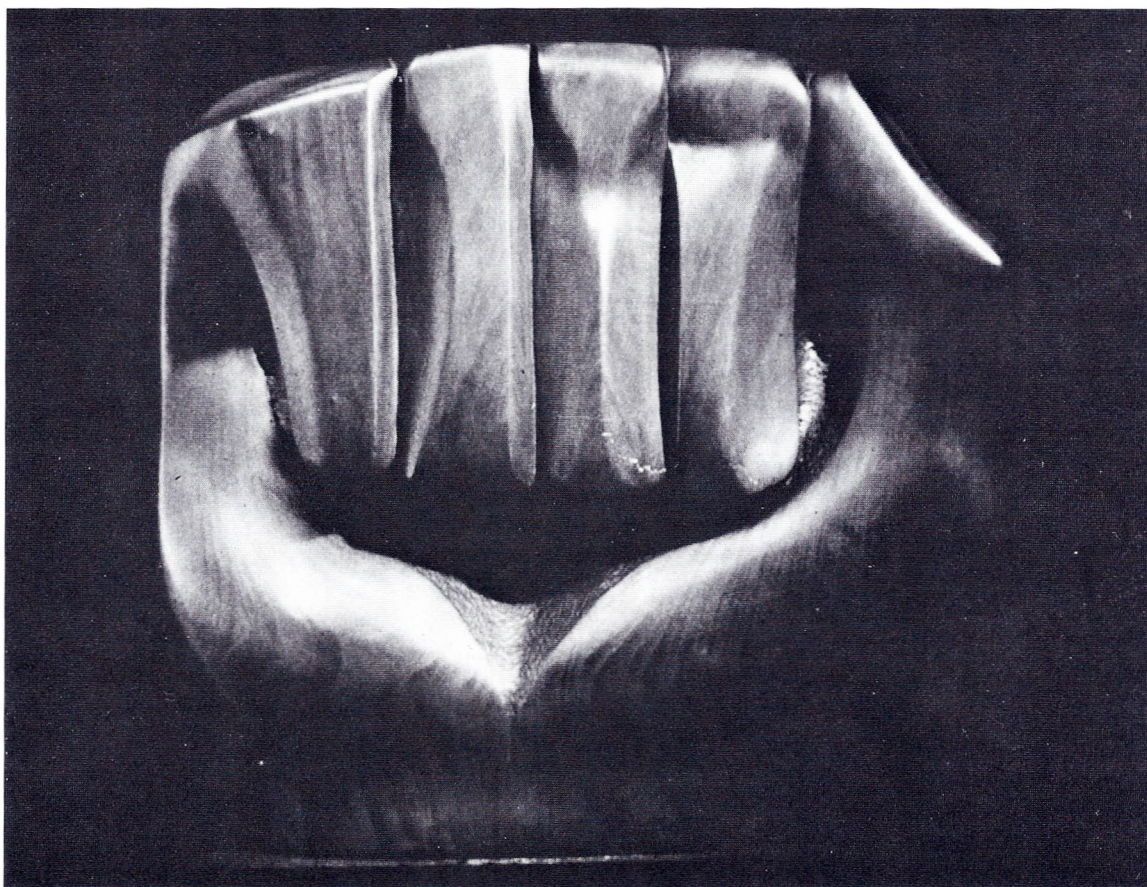


Selma Burke with "Mother and Child"



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"Black Unity," by Elizabeth Catlett

"Ms. Brown & Children," by Faith Ringgold



"Richard Berry Harrison," by Meta Warrick Fuller

PHOTOGRAPHY BY P. P. ANGLADE



"Plain Woman," by Augusta Savage

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"Dawn on the Niger," by Delilah Pierce

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOHN TEMPLETON—JIM WELLS PHOTOGRAPHERS



"Labotomy I," by Carole Byard

