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SAMUEL JOSEPH BROWN: THE ARTIST

BY DR. J. CLAY SMITH, JR.*

August 1, 1982
Washington, D.C.

I.

Introduction

There is no artist in America quite like Samuel Joseph Brown of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.** Born on April 16, 1907 in Wilmington, North Carolina, Sam Brown has created works which have been admired by art critics and the casual observer, as well as by the wife of a president of the United States. Brown is a generous, thoughtful man but a restless person whose creative energy has been applied on hundreds, now perhaps thousands, of watercolors, oils, pencil drawings, sculptures, and constructions which are housed in the finest collections in the world.

The purpose of this paper is to highlight Samuel J. Brown -- an art relic of Philadelphia, and a treasure unique to America. Sam Brown -- the artist, the man, the philosopher cannot be

* Dr. Smith is the founder of the Jurisart Movement. This article is part of his Jurisart series. Dr. Smith was graduated from the Creighton University with an A.B. in 1964, from the Howard University School of Law with the J.D. in 1967, and from the George Washington National Law Center in 1970 and 1977 with the L.L.M. and S.J.D. degrees, respectively.

** Samuel J. Brown has lived in three places in Philadelphia in the past 50 years: 224 North Ruby Street, 5820 Arch Street and, since November 16, 1945, 5914 West Thompson Street, where he presently resides with his wife Miriam, to whom he has been married since June 25, 1938.

adequately treated in this paper. It is my hope that this paper may come to the attention of art historians and stimulate them to properly frame Brown, an Afro-American, as he should be -- a permanent fixture in the annals of American art.

II.

Education and WPA Days

Samuel J. Brown is not a common man - and he's never been common -- even at the James Logan Elementary and South Philadelphia High Schools from which he was graduated. Brown attended the University of Pennsylvania for one year. He graduated from the Pennsylvania Museum of Art specializing in art education for public schools. In addition he completed almost all of the required credits for a Masters of Fine Arts from the University of Pennsylvania and Villanova University. Armed with his own natural talent and the training he received from the Museum, Brown launched his teaching career as a teacher of commercial art in 1938 at the Bok Vocational High School. He taught art in technical high schools in Philadelphia and in Camden, New Jersey for 35 years, retiring in July of 1971.

Like many Afro-American artists during the Depression years, Brown owned a sign painting business* and participated in the Pennsylvania Work Art Project (PWAP) between 1933-1935. The Depression hit Afro-American artists exceptionally hard. However,

* Brown painted signs for a Mr. Holiday who owned a 5 and 10 cent store on 69th Street in Philadelphia and for S.S. Kresge. Brown, a bicycle rider, advertised his business with a sign on his bicycle.

the social and political deprivation of American Blacks was preserved by artists like Sam Brown, whose art became a statement depicting the breakdown of and the disregard in some quarters for the rule of law to the human detriment of Afro-Americans.

Brown was one of the fortunate Afro-Americans, who applied for and was appointed to the first Public Works of Art Project by Fiske Kimball, who was in charge of the project (district) of Philadelphia, in December 1933. That same year he exhibited two watercolors at the Harmon Foundation. The multi-talented Brown worked in several medias in the project, especially watercolor in which few equalled his technique. During the WPA days, Brown was very productive. He participated in several group shows including exhibitions at Howard University (1935), the University of Pennsylvania (1936), the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the Baltimore Museum of Art and the Museum of Modern Art in 1937.* His work was also part of a group show that toured Europe in 1939.

Brown's work in the Public Works of Art Project was not the first public demonstration of his creative talent. It is reported that in the late 1920's and the early 1930's Brown painted "ten murals in restaurants in Philadelphia." Several of his drawings were reproduced in the Crisis magazine, the official organ of the National Association for the Advancement

* Brown exhibited at the Pennsylvania Museum of Art in 1928, 1930, 1934 and had a one man show in 1940. A. Locke, The Negro in Art 130 (Washington, D.C. 1940).

of Colored People. In 1928, one of his pieces appeared in House Beautiful as one of 100 best submissions for the cover competition.

Brown's talent did not go unnoticed. Major white newspapers such as the Public Ledger (4/15/34), (2/26/35), The Tribune (1/4/34), and Inquirer (2/24/35) commented on his art. A painting entitled "Lazy Bones" was reproduced in The Record on (4/12/34) and "The Lynching" was reproduced in The Tribune on (4/19/34). Nor did the talent of Sam Brown go unnoticed by the premier scholarship of Dr. Alain Locke in his book The Negro In Art, published in 1940. Brown was recognized not only by Locke but by Howard University, which in February 1940 held an exhibition of three Philadelphia artists - Laura Wheeling Waring, Allan Freelon and Samuel Joseph Brown. An article appearing in the university student newspaper, The Hilltop (February 28, 1940) stated:

The youngest of these artists is Samuel Joseph Brown, who worked on the Federal Art Project under WPA. His dominant media is a water color interest, of which he has a number on display.*

Many of Brown's pencil studies and watercolors were sold to prominent people in the Philadelphia community, such as Edmonson Hussey, who was principal of the Pennsylvania Museum of Art, on January 20, 1933, and the Providence Lithograph Co. in 1937. He also illustrated "The Picnic," which was one of a series from the Lincoln School, Columbia University published by Gosset and Dunlap.

* The show was also noted on February 4, 1940 in the Sunday edition of the Washington Post.

III.

Fiske Kimball and Samuel J. Brown

During the mid 1930's, the talents of Samuel J. Brown came to the attention of Fiske Kimball, who has previously been identified as the person who appointed Brown to the Public Works of Art Project. More significantly, Kimball was also the Director of the Pennsylvania Museum of Art. On June 4, 1934, Kimball sent a letter to the Harmon Foundation in which he acclaimed Brown as an outstanding and important find of the PWAP. Kimball, apparently well aware of the need for Brown to broaden his talent and possibly recognizing the barriers confronting Afro-American artists, inquired about scholarship opportunities for Brown to study abroad. Specifically, Fiske Kimball wrote:

You may be interested to know that, while I was in charge of the Public Works of Art Project in this district, one of my appointees was a negro artist, Samuel Brown. Although his work had been shown at your exhibitions in New York, it was hitherto unknown to our committee on selection, which chose him entirely on the merits of the work itself.

I am happy to say that we all felt the work he did for us was among the best and most striking we had from any of our employed artists, and he certainly ranks as one of the finds of the Public Works Project. Some of his paintings were sent to Washington for exhibition, and, among some 40 paintings selected for the Pennsylvania Museum of Art by a distinguished committee, were four of his, a larger number than those chosen from the work of any other artist.

Naturally we all take an interest now in the future career of this artist, and I write to inquire whether your Foundation possibly maintains any travelling artist scholarships, that he might have an opportunity of studying abroad.

It occurs to me also that conceivably Brown might well be considered for one of the Spingarn prizes. Would you be kind enough to let me know who administers these?

On June 11, 1934, Fiske Kimball received a lengthy reply from Mary Beattie Brady of the Harmon Foundation. The Harmon Foundation replied that it did not grant scholarships to artists. However, it did have a modest loan fund to which artists could apply. Ms. Brady wrote:

We are, I am sorry to say, not in a position to grant scholarships for art study. Our work in student aid has been confined entirely to the promotion of an experimental program in the development of a student loan service...

Ms. Brady then suggested that Mr. Kimball write Mr. Henry Allen Moe, Secretary of the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation because: "Their grants are very liberal and a number have been made in the past to Negroes." Other suggestions made to Mr. Kimball on Sam Brown's behalf included the Julius Rosenwald Fund, the Carnegie Corporation, the Phelps-Stoke Fund, a Miss Louise Brooks (who Ms. Brady said "was the woman who discovered Roland Hayes and got him in touch with the director of the Boston Symphony"), and the National Urban League.

In addition to the suggestions for scholarship assistance for Sam Brown in the Brady to Kimball letter of June 11, 1934, it was also noted that representatives from the Harmon Foundation had seen the art work of Sam Brown at the Corcoran Art Gallery earlier that year. In commenting on the Corcoran show Ms. Brady wrote:

Both Miss Evelyn Brown, assistant director of the Harmon Foundation, and I happened to be in Washington during the exhibition of the P.W.A. at the Corcoran Art Gallery and we were most happy to see the work of Samuel Brown represented. While neither of us is an art critic, we could not help but feel that his "Scrub Woman" had something fine and strong which made it stand out as one of the outstanding items in the exhibition.

The opportunity to travel abroad never occurred for Samuel J. Brown. However, he did visit Nassau in 1938* and spent the summer of 1945 touring Mexico; and "painted the varied group of watercolors and oils on Mexican subjects that made up the major part of the 1946 exhibition" at the Barnett-Aden Gallery. See Exhibit program. During the same year he toured Mexico, Brown exhibited at the Art Alliance in Philadelphia during December 1945 - January 1946.

It remains the obligation of art historians to unearth what, if any, meaningful steps Mr. Fiske Kimball took to advance the career of Sam Brown in Philadelphia and the United

* Brown travelled to Nassau with his wife on their honeymoon. "My wife paid for the trip. She was a teacher," said Brown. During his honeymoon, Brown reports that he painted over 30 pieces.

States.* However, it is significant that a person of Kimball's importance took an interest in a Black man during a time when large numbers of Black people in America were being lynched and were being denied entry into cultural centers on the basis of race. Perhaps it is because of Kimball's efforts on his behalf that Sam Brown offered to do a Fiske Kimball portrait in February, 1936 which was completed and presented to Mr. Kimball on February 27, 1939. On that date, Mr. Kimball wrote Brown that "my portrait was delivered here to the office by Finken this morning, very handsomely framed, and various people have seen it here. Mr. Marceau particularly admired it, as do I, and I am greatly obliged to you for making me such a handsome present."

As a WPA member, Samuel J. Brown's art made its way into the Federal Art Collection and according to Harmon Foundation records was allocated to "The University of Pennsylvania,..., The Parkway Museum, Temple University. One of his pictures was allocated to the White House."

IV.

Barnett-Aden Gallery and Samuel J. Brown

Samuel J. Brown's reputation as a first rate artist reached not only the White House in Washington, D.C, but the Barnett-Aden

* According to Brown, Fiske Kimball opened doors for him "on the Main Line," a term which means people with money. For example, Mr. Kimball recommended Samuel J. Brown to many of his friends in Philadelphia and as far away as Greenwich, Connecticut. Brown painted a bank executive in Philadelphia whose name was Frank M. Hart on Kimball's recommendation. He also painted a well known lawyer named Orville Sebrings who was associated with a large law firm - Morgan, Lewis and Bockius. This was during the late 1930's, Brown received as much as \$300.00 from his white benefactors for his portraits.

Gallery, in which he exhibited in 1946..

The Barnett-Aden Gallery, owned and operated by Afro-Americans (but diverse in its exhibitors and exhibitions), was the Corcoran of the Afro-American world.* At that time Alonzo J. Aden was Director of the Barnett-Aden Gallery and John A. Shuford was Assistant Director with other prominent people such as Ms. Alma W. Thomas and James V. Herring sitting on the board of the Gallery.

It was at the Barnett-Aden Gallery that two oils and one print were exhibited which in today's Nuclear Age have significant meaning — "Global War" and "Global Peace" (oils) and "War, Blood and Tears" (print). On January 29, 1946 Alonzo Aden was anxious to forward to New York the press release for the exhibit of Sam Brown to the Harmon Foundation. Some of Sam Brown's work remains in Barnett-Aden collection. See The Barnett-Aden Collection 51. (picture of "The Twins" (watercolor) dated 1945 and at p. 166, a biographical of Samuel J. Brown, published by Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington, D.C., 1974).

V.

Eleanor Roosevelt and Samuel J. Brown

Aside from Sam Brown's own testimonials to Eleanor Roosevelt, the wife of Franklin D. Roosevelt, the president of the United States, there is evidence that Mrs. Roosevelt admired Mr. Brown's work. Mr. Brown has indicated that Mrs. Roosevelt visited his

* The Barnett-Aden Gallery first opened for exhibitions on October 16, 1943 in Washington, D.C.

home to see his paintings on one of her visits to Philadelphia. Mr. Brown has also indicated that she named the "Scrub Woman," one of his most famous paintings which, today, he cannot locate.* (This painting appeared in 1940 in Alain Locke's, The Negro In Art at p. 93.) According to Mr. Brown, Mrs. Roosevelt first saw his art during the Corcoran Art Exhibit in 1933. There is independent evidence suggesting that Mrs. Roosevelt was indeed interested in Brown's work during this period. For example, Professor James A. Porter notes in his Modern Negro Art (Arno Press, 1969) that:

Samuel Brown ... proved his merit as an employee of the Work Projects Administration regional office of Philadelphia. In the national exhibition of paintings executed under the Public Works Administration and held at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in 1934, Brown displayed a watercolor of a Negro charwoman. Many judged the work shockingly amateurish and extremely grotesque. Others, including the exhibition officials and Mrs. Roosevelt, singled it out for special and favorable comment.

The interests of Mrs. Roosevelt in Sam Brown were noted in Mary Beattie Brady's (of the Harmon Foundation) June 4, 1934 letter to Fiske Kimball. In that letter Mrs. Brady wrote:

I was told when I was in Washington that Mrs. Franklin D. Roosevelt was much interested in Mr. Brown's work, but this may have been just newspaper talk. I would have no way of getting in touch with her.

* The Scrub Woman was painted when Brown lived in an apartment at 5820 Arch Street in Philadelphia.

While Mrs. Brady's letter may seem inconclusive on the issue of Mrs. Roosevelt and Sam Brown, in 1934 few, if any Black men, and certainly no Black male artists (except Brown) were mentioned as "newspaper talk" in connection with the wife of the president of the United States.

Other evidence exists to support the Roosevelt-Brown connection. Prior to or during the Sam Brown exhibit at the Barnett-Aden Gallery from February - March 1946, Alonzo J. Aden, the Gallery Director invited Mrs. Roosevelt to the opening of the exhibit. On February 21, 1946, Mrs. Roosevelt replied to Mr. Aden stating, "I regret very much that I shall be unable to visit your art gallery on February 23rd as I expect to be away." Mrs. Roosevelt's regrets were noted by Marie Williams in The Pittsburgh Courier in her column "D.C. Glitter" on Saturday, March 16, 1946, in which she wrote: "Samuel Joseph Brown, the artist, was here recently for the showing of his work at the Barnett-Aden Gallery... Mrs. Roosevelt, who aided the painter in the start of his career, sent regrets."

Perhaps the most direct piece of evidence on the Roosevelt-Brown connection is the correspondence she sent to Sam Brown, apparently in response to a request by Brown that she see his work prior to the closing of his exhibit at the Barnett-Aden collection. On March 4, 1946 Mrs. Roosevelt, writing to Brown from her Madison Avenue apartment in New York, said:

I remember your "Scrub Woman" very well and wish I could get down to see your work. However, I cannot be in Washington except for one day on the 14th and every minute is filled.

Perhaps I could see your picture in Philadelphia on April 5th when I will be there.

VI.

Samuel Joseph Brown: An American Treasure

Samuel Joseph Brown is an American treasure. His art represents every group of people in America. Neither Sam Brown's mind, his creative spirit, nor his art is or has ever been segregated. However, to his credit, Brown has preserved the dignity of the Afro-American in the attractive oils and water-colors of Blacks who dug deep into their pockets to purchase an art piece by one of their own.*

The art of Samuel Joseph Brown spans a half century. In 1935 the Philadelphia Bulletin wrote that "Sam Brown ... is now hailed as one of the country's leading Negro painters...." The truth of the matter is that when this statement was written in the Bulletin, Brown was one of the leading painters in the United States and it is by his own dogmatic and persevering energy that he refused to give in to the notion that art is not an area of labor in which Blacks can hope to achieve and be recognized.

* Brown has commented that Alonzo J. Aden of the Barnett-Aden Gallery paid as much as \$200.00 for his work around 1946. However, Brown is quick to add that the conditions of the country often forced Afro-Americans to pay less for his work. He states that in the 40's he painted portraits of Blacks for \$5.00.

Sam Brown is more than an artist; he is an historical person whose life is an inspiration to artists and laymen alike. Art historians can no longer overlook Samuel Joseph Brown. Nor can general historians who continue to write about Eleanor Roosevelt overlook Brown.

Much more scholarship and public attention should be given to pioneer artists like Samuel Joseph Brown, who like so many other Afro-American artists have influenced the diverse culture of America.

VII.

Jurisart and Samuel J. Brown

The Jurisart movement was founded to illustrate, inter alia, the close connection between art and law as co-expressions of free speech. The art of Samuel J. Brown has touched all aspects of human life and events over the past 50 years. However, Brown's inauguration into the Jurisart is attributed to his artistic statements which have furthered the principles of law. He has achieved this objective by painting or otherwise creating art pieces which have exposed aspects of a lawless society, or a globe which would destroy itself by war rather than peaceful negotiations, and other relevant pieces.

Samuel J. Brown is not trained as a lawyer, but several of his canvases are legal briefs calling for social and economic justice for Afro-Americans. It is because of his deep compassion for humankind and his assiduous demands for fairness and his

life long quest for justice that he is given special status
in the Jurisart movement.

J. Clay Smith, Jr.