

BLACK BEAUTY

Reflections on the “Breakthrough Years”
in American Art Museums [DRAFT] by Lanier Graham

Those of us who were active in the New York art world of the ‘60s have vivid memories of how African-American art began to blossom in the late ‘60s & early ‘70s. Until that period, very few artists of color received any attention in the White Euro-American establishment which controlled the major art museums & galleries of the United States.

The Civil Rights Movement of the late ‘50s & early ‘60s eventually generated a radical change in White perceptions. The March on Washington in August of 1963, 100 years after the Emancipation Proclamation, was a pivotal event. About 250,000 people of all colors gathered to march from the Washington Monument to the Lincoln Memorial. The legendary “I have a Dream” speech by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was deeply moving.

Those of us who were there felt his words deeply that day. Thanks to television, the nation and much of the rest of the world felt his words deeply that day. All three networks carried his speech, while a new telecommunications satellite beamed his words around the globe. At the end of that day, King and his fellow black leaders met with President Kennedy who was pushing for the legislation they all were dreaming of, the legislation that the march was designed to support. At first JFK was against the idea of such a march, fearing violence. But he finally agreed, and the non-violent spirit of Dr. King pervaded the day.

Until that day, Civil Rights issues were largely regarded by most White Americans as “their problem.” Suddenly, these issues became “our problem.” For many in the White world, Norman Rockwell’s painting “The Problem We All Share” when it appeared on the cover of LOOK magazine in January 1964 became a focal point for this rapid nationwide shift in White consciousness from “them” to “us.”

Rockwell pictures 6-year old Ruby Bridges integrating a school with the help of federal marshals walking past a wall of racial graffiti. Nothing of this kind had ever been seen on an American magazine cover. Rockwell was the most popular American artist of the 20th century. Millions of people loved his magazine covers. Rockwell was as White as White can be, and so was his audience, and his longtime publisher SATURDAY EVENING POST, which was not especially liberal. But when Rockwell moved to LOOK in 1963 he was finally able to give expression to his liberal feelings in his last years, and he brought many Americans with him.

During 1963 & 1964 a large number of voters showed they had been moved by Dr. King and many other social activists, and even Rockwell. The voters put a great deal of pressure on Congress, especially after the assassination of JFK in November 1963.

President Lyndon Johnson, during a “honeymoon period” before the horrific escalation of the Vietnam War guided Congress towards enacting JFK’s radical legislative proposals. Congress passed the Civil Rights Act in 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. That legislation was not the whole of Dr. King’s dream, of course. We are still a long way from true equality, genuine justice, and the end of racism. But that legislation was a great leap forward.

However, there still were not many exhibitions of African-American art in New York or anywhere else in the mid ‘60s. It would take more to reverse the tide of discrimination in the

art world. The tide would change direction after the assassination of Dr. King in April 1968.

As Black rage set American cities on fire from coast to coast that spring, museum curators were thinking deeply about how well they were serving the public, all the public. The first major art museum to present an historical overview of Black culture in the United States was "Harlem on my Mind: Cultural Capital of Black America 1900-1968" at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1969.

The Met probably was (and still is) the most widely respected art museum in the United States. It had recently begun to take a serious interest in modern American art, posing a challenge to the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) & the Whitney, but showed no interest in art by people of color.

All that changed with a single exhibition. The driving force behind this historic show was Tom Hoving, the newly appointed Director of the Met. From my conversations with Hoving in 1964, when I was a graduate student at Columbia, I knew he had been dreaming about the need for such a show since the 1963 March on Washington. But he was just a junior curator at the Met then.

When Hoving was appointed Director of the Met in 1967 he had the power to start the museum revolution of which he had been dreaming. When he finally presented his dream exhibition in January 1969, a new chapter in the art world began. "Harlem on My Mind" was radical in many ways. The core concept was a gigantic photographic documentation of Harlem's culture with a substantial catalog.

It was not an exhibition of Black painting & sculpture. Instead, using a semi- sociological "documentary" approach, the show and the book provided a comprehensive survey of Black music, literature, and life in Harlem, with its joys & sorrows, from its historical origins, through the flowering of the Harlem Renaissance of the '20s & '30s, up to the tense political present. A photograph of Malcolm X was on the cover.

The photographs in the book were balanced with newspaper articles from each decade of the 20th century. The exhibition would have been impressive if it were only photo-panels, but the show was more dramatic. It was the first extensive use of multi-media technology in an art museum.

In a five-gallery space of 18,000 square feet, there were 700 photographic enlargements plus 500 projected images. There were numerous projectors, speakers, tape decks, & video monitors, with many sound tracks & lots of Black music. It was an extraordinary experience. As many as 4,000 people an hour walked through. All attendance records were broken.

The whole event stunned the art world. In a swirl of controversy, the Black world suddenly moved from backstage to center stage.

There were many critics, of course, both Black & White. Many Black artists, such as Gordon Parks, loved the show. However, Romare Bearden, Jacob Lawrence, & many other Black artists were extremely disappointed that there was not a parallel show of Black painters & sculptors. The conservative White art critics hated the show. Many people wanted Hoving fired for "disgracing" the museum. The Board of the Met actually considered that at one point. But Hoving survived.

There are so many aspects to consider that a book could be written about this show. One chapter of such a book should be the extent of community participation, in a time before most museums thought about the idea of any community participation. There was a Community Advisory Committee of 34 members, but communications broke down. Harlem's rejection of the Met's final plans led to the creation of the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition, which would generate many protest actions. Another chapter should

discuss the problem of the primary curator being a White person with two African-American assistants.

Hoving was a spectacular showman who (among other things) developed not only the Harlem show but also the modern "blockbuster" (King Tut, etc.). He was motivated by a genuine desire to make the Met serve a wide audience and not only the White middle class people who were the usual audience for its exhibitions & publications. When I congratulated Hoving on the Harlem show, he thanked me, then said with a smile: "The Old Lady's got new clothes! "

Then he wanted to know about the behind-the-scenes negotiations that several of us on the MoMA staff had been conducting with social activists such as Angela Davis, Lucy Lippard, and the rest of the newly formed Art Worker's Coalition whose picket lines had been very active in front of MoMA for months. I told Hoving many of the proposals seemed quite reasonable: more exhibitions of people of color, more curators of color, a free-admission day for poor people, people of color on the MoMA Board of Directors, and perhaps part of the vast MoMA collection (of which only 10 % could be shown at any one time) being exhibited in Harlem where MoMA already had helped to start the Studio Museum. Many of those proposals were accepted and acted on by MoMA, and by many other art museums, during the early '70s. The tide was turning.

Those who were not there may find it hard to believe how deeply ingrained discrimination was in the art museum world, and much of that was not conscious. There was a mind-set in the curatorial world, like most of the rest of the white world, that the history of art took place without much input from people of color. Almost all art museum curators were white. Most (but not all) these curators were not stupid or hateful but simply color-blind. They were operating from habitual cultural perceptions that were centuries old. They needed to be jolted. The Harlem show, and the increased social activism it inspired, was a big jolt.

For example, the Whitney Museum of American art mounted an exhibition called "American Artists of the 1930s" with no black artists. The spectacular achievements of the Harlem Renaissance were simply overlooked. The fact that two of America's most important curators of modern art, Alfred Barr at MoMA and Duncan Phillips in Washington, D.C., had collected the work of Jacob Lawrence in the 1940s was simply forgotten. Many black artists properly protested. The Studio Museum in Harlem mounted a counter-exhibition: "Invisible Americans: Black Arts of the 30s." The Whitney promptly responded with an exhibition called "CONTEMPORARY BLACK AMERICAN ART" in 1971. The tide was turning, and many museums followed with both contemporary and historic shows. MoMA in 1971 presented solo shows by Romare Bearden and Richard Hunt. These were firsts for Black Americans. In 1972 the Whitney gave a solo show to Alma Thomas - the first Black woman to solo there, after a strong nudge from Faith Ringgold & the feminist wing of the Art Workers Coalition called WAR (Women Artists in Revolution). Sam Gilliam appeared in the Venice Biennale of 1972, another first.

During the late '60s, Hoving also pioneered bringing people of color into art museums by exhibiting the tribal art of their ancestors, beside the art of Euro-American ancestors. He was the first American museum director to put the traditional art of the tribal world on an equal footing with the "high art" of Europe, Asia, etc. Nelson Rockefeller's collection of the "Museum of Primitive Art," which had a quiet little life in an old brownstone that few people visited, moved uptown to become a beautiful addition to the Met.

The old white term "primitive art," with all its overtones of condescension and colonialism, was washed away. The Met's new term was "The Art of Africa, Oceania, & the Americas," and that term quickly became a standard curatorial term. Here was the first gallery of tribal art in an American art museum. Thanks to major Rockefeller funding, this was more than a gallery; it was a huge new wing.

During Hoving's dynamic 10-year directorship, the size of the Met doubled, membership increased dramatically, and most importantly the diversity of the audience increased from a little to a lot. Hoving's critics found him too slick and too arrogant. And he certainly did things that are not to be admired, including illegal things. But the museum profession also owes him many debts, including blowing open a hole in the race barrier.

Other museums followed the Met's AOA lead as soon as funding could be gathered. A good case study for how smaller museums responded to the national call to be more diverse is The Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco where I was Chief Curator from 1970 to 1976.

Our AOA gallery, curated by T. K. Seligman and Kathleen Berrin with the expert help of Jane Dwyer, opened in 1973. Now every major American art museum exhibits the tribal art of Africa, Oceania, & the Americas. After beginning modestly with a small collection, FAMSF now has an AOA collection, which matches those of East Coast museums.

FAMSF in the early '70s also began presenting contemporary exhibitions such as "Rhythms & Reverberations" featuring Henry Rollins, a black artist from Oakland, & Carlos Villa, a multicultural artist of Asian and Hispanic descent, along with exhibitions of traditional tribal art of Africa and of the Huichol of Mexico. The Huichol show had the benefit of Huichol shamans as consultants. That was another pioneering move by Seligman & Berrin. Their action was a model for a principle that was later incorporated into the Code of Ethics of the International Council of Museums: art museums should not organize exhibitions of ethnic art without advice from people of that ethnicity. FAMSF curators were asked to help write the first Codes of Ethics for the Collage Art Association & the Association of American Museums in the early '70s.

FAMSF has grown a great deal since then, but the innovative pro-diversity principles that guided its program during the early '70s are still its guiding principles. The FAMSF exhibition program & collection programs today now include African-American artists not as something unusual but as something normal. So it was not a surprise to see FAMSF present in 1992 a major exhibition of Henry Ossawa Tanner, the most important African-American artist of the 19th century, and in 1998 "Rhapsodies in Black: Art of the Harlem Renaissance."

Once it had been demonstrated there was an audience for black art in the early '70s, publishers finally welcomed the work of black scholars who had been writing historical surveys. Previously, most such surveys were modest publications with limited budgets intended for "negro" audiences. Now the production values were world-class, and aimed at readers of all colors.

It was during these pivotal years between the late '60s & early '70s that the word "negro" disappeared from museum exhibitions and publications and was replaced by "Black" and "African-American."

Pioneering surveys of these breakthrough years included BLACK ARTISTS ON ART (1969 & 1971) by Samella Lewis & Ruth Waddy (first published by Lewis herself), SEVENTEEN BLACK ARTISTS (1971) by Elton Fax, HARLEM RENAISSANCE by Nathan Huggins, 6 BLACK MASTERS OF AMERICAN ART (1972) by Romare Bearden & Harry Henderson, THE AFRO-AMERICAN ARTIST: A SEARCH FOR IDENTITY by Elsa Fine (1973). Bearden went on to spend 15 years writing most of his monumental HISTORY OF AFRICAN AMERICAN ARTISTS, FROM 1792 TO THE PRESENT (1993). It was completed after his death in 1988 by Harry Henderson.

Then came the exhibition and publication TWO CENTURIES OF BLACK AMERICAN ART (1976) by David C. Driskell, which was the Bicentennial exhibition of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and then toured to Dallas, Atlanta, and Brooklyn. Driskell is a

remarkable artist, professor, scholar, author, editor, and collector, and probably the most highly respected African American art historian today.

AFRICAN AMERICAN ART & ARTISTS by Samella Lewis (1978) became a classic textbook and has been updated a number of times, most recently by the University of California Press. She also started BLACK ART: AN INTERNATIONAL QUARTERLY (now THE INTERNATIONAL REVIEW OF AFRICAN AMERICAN ART), and was active in founding the Museum of African American Art in Los Angeles.

Since the mid '70s, many survey histories and exhibition catalogs have appeared, but this was an explosive beginning for a whole new body of literature.

In short, by the mid '70s, the tide had turned. Waves of equality were beginning to break on the shore. Visual integration into the "mainstream" had begun.