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Documented Struggles and Triumph: African American Art

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"I am not unmindful that some of you have come here out of great trials and tribulations. Some of you have come fresh from narrow jail cells. Some of you have come from areas where your quest for freedom left you battered by the storms of persecution and staggered by the winds of police brutality. You have been the veterans of creative suffering. Continue to work with the faith that unearned suffering is redemptive." These words were spoken by Martin Luther King Jr., a major leader of the Civil Rights Movement, in the famous speech, "I Have a Dream" (King 361). King's speech undoubtedly captures the profound struggles and immense strength of African Americans in American history. African Americans have been enslaved, traded, bought, sold, treated as property, freed, segregated, and demoralized. Throughout all of their hardships and struggles art has been present.

The emergence of African Americans as artists began in the Colonial Era with simple portraits. The first African American artist to gain recognition as a portraitist was Joshua Johnston who worked in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. The majority of his portraits were of wealthy European American families, who were slave owners (Fig. 1). Johnston was formerly a slave, and as rumors suggests, his former owner was also a portraitist from which Johnston acquired his skills. Interestingly, Johnston did not sign or date any of his works (Lewis 15). It seems as though a suggestion to his name might reveal his race which would make the work less valuable, or seem insufficient to the other works created at the time. Another African American portrait artist of the Colonial era was Julien Hudson. Although the artist is of African descent, his piece *Self Portrait* (Fig. 2) shows the artist as a well dressed man with European features. The nose on the gentleman in the painting seems quite Romanesque. He is dressed in a tuxedo, complete with a bow tie around his neck. The portrait has a deep connection to the European artist Charles Bird King's piece, *Young Omawhaw, War Eagle, Little Missouri, and Pawness*. While King's piece, with subjects bearing Romanesque noses and European features, referred to the ability of Native Americans to be assimilated to American ways, Hudson's work may have implied that African Americans also had the nobility to fit in with the Europeans, not as slaves but as equals.

As the 1860's approached the Northern and Southern United States began to conflict, the main difference being economy and slavery. The Northern United States did not keep African Americans as slaves, instead they were free. The North did not have the need for as much free labor because the economy was based on industry. In the South cotton controlled the economy. Slaves were numerous and seemed essential to keep the plantations afloat. As anti-slavery became stronger in the North and slavery remained a

standard of the South Abraham Lincoln's statement, "A house divided against itself cannot stand" became a reality. The Civil War took place from 1861 to 1865. Lincoln, the leader of the Northern states, fought with the Emancipation Proclamation, which would free all slaves, as a war goal. Upon the Northern victory in 1863 the slaves were freed in the South.

Following the Civil War, African American art became more prevalent in the United States. The work from this time seemed to contain undertones relating to the injustice of slavery, and the newfound freedom that African Americans were experiencing. As McElroy, author of *African American Artists 1880-1987*, points out, "The African-American artists who reached maturity following the Civil War experienced the broadened opportunity afforded by emancipation but suffered the ostracism and limitations imposed by new forms of institutionalized racism" (15).

An amazing artist that emerged after the Civil War was Henry O. Tanner. His ambitions to become an artist were met with difficult detours. He sought to gain instruction from white artists of the time but was quickly rejected. He did not falter in his goals to become and artist and after working independently for numerous years he began school at Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts (McElroy 23). Eventually, Tanner would use his skills to teach to other African American artists, allowing them to better develop their skills using his studio. In 1880, during his first year at the Pennsylvania Academy, Tanner created his piece *After the Storm* in monochromatic blue (Fig.3). To the left of the painting is a ship that has been ravaged by the storm, and although this seems to be quite a disaster, it is not the main focus of the work. The main focus lies in the middle of the painting where there is nothing but calm, soothing, serene water. The piece seems as though a metaphor for the end of a disastrous era and the awakening of a new, bright beginning.

Another successful piece that Henry O. Tanner created is entitled *The Banjo Lesson*, from 1893 (Fig. 6). The piece was created with very muted colors, which gives it a somber tone. An old African American man sits with a child on his lap in the center of the painting. The child is holding a banjo, which was an original African instrument. This is significant because it shows that the old man is passing down a cultural tradition to the next generation, even after slavery, the African Americans still held on to their African roots and wanted to pass them on. However, what is more significant about the banjo is the technique in which the man is teaching the young boy to play. Originally, Africans played the banjo with downward strums, but when the European Americans adopted the banjo they wanted to have a way to make it unique and to disconnect it from the African culture. Instead of the downward strumming, European Americans developed a new technique in which they would pluck the strings with their fingers. In *The Banjo Lesson*, the old man is teaching the young boy to pluck the strings, instead of downward strumming (Pohl 354). The man and child are able to keep a part of their past, while adapting to the European ways.

Similar to Henry O. Tanner's piece, *After the Storm* (Fig. 3), in 1886 artist Edward Mitchell Bannister similarly used a storm as a metaphor for struggles of African Americans in the United States. His piece *Approaching Storm* (Fig. 4) was created around the same time that the Jim Crow laws were put in place to enforce segregation. "Separate but equal" was the motto for segregation, however, black facilities were often inferior to

the white facilities. Jim Crow Laws included such absurd laws as, "No person or corporation shall require any white female nurse to nurse in wards or rooms in hospitals, either public or private, in which Negro men are placed. Alabama." Or "Books shall not be interchangeable between the white and colored school, but shall continue to be used by the race first using them. North Carolina" ('Jim Crow' Laws). Although African Americans were freed, they were still treated as though they were not equal with the European Americans. They were still treated as vile, destitute humans who should not be allowed to have the same opportunities, or even be in the same vicinity of people of Caucasian descent. Segregation could definitely be represented as a strong storm, and Bannister's piece represents this quite well. The piece is largely a landscape painting. The sky is filled with the deep grays and dark colors of a strong approaching storm, the trees in the background seem as though they are rustling with the wind. In the foreground is a figure that appears to be minute compared to his overpowering surroundings. The figure is struggling against the elements that surround him, but he is still fighting to stay on his feet. His piece seems to relate to the struggle to remain dignified as and African American during segregation. Bannister fed off of a statement printed in the New York Herald in 1867 which claimed, "'While the negro may harbor an appreciation of art, he is unable to produce it.' Bannister accepted the statement as a personal challenge" (Lewis 30). Bannister's story highlights the mistreatment of African Americans even after slavery ended. One of his pieces entitled *Under the Oaks* was selected for an honorary prize at an art museum. Bannister arrived at the museum to receive the award only to be turned away due to his race.

Although African Americans were facing struggles such as segregation, the amount of joy that the Emancipation Proclamation brought was still significant. Freedom became the subject of many pieces of art, including works from Edmonia Lewis and other pieces by the above mentioned established artist Henry O. Tanner.

Forever Free by Edmonia Lewis is a marble sculpture from 1867 (Fig. 5). The sculpture seems to be a response or chronology to European American artist John Rogers' piece *Slave Auction* from 1859. Rogers' mass produced plaster sculpture shows African Americans as slaves, and the hardships they faced being auctioned from one person to another. He is able to capture the sorrow and anger that slaves experienced. A gentle man stands with great anger on his face, and his wife embraces her children with the knowledge that she will soon be separated from them. The emotion that the piece evokes is phenomenal. Similarly, Lewis' piece touches the viewer. The subjects in the sculpture also are encased in emotion, but instead of sorrow it shows great joy. It shows the overwhelming feeling of relief that must have been felt by slaves when the injustice had finally come to an end. The man in *Forever Free* stands with broken shackles around his arms and legs. The constraints that held him down for so many years were finally gone. The man's wife is kneeling on the ground. She is bent in prayer and together with the male looks towards the heavens in thankfulness.

The Thankful Poor, by Henry O. Tanner in 1894 (Fig. 7), also carries a theme of thankfulness for the end of slavery. The background of the oil painting is very muted. The colors are neutral and dull. Because the elements of the painting are not distracting the viewer is able to be drawn into the lives of the subjects in the artwork. An African

American man and a young girl sit alone at a small table for a meal. On the table sits the meal which consists of one small plate of food. It is apparent to the viewer that these two people do not have much in life. The house is small, and so is the meal that they will soon be sharing. Often times these Americans lived in ghettos, not being allowed to integrate with white Americans. However the two people are bowing their heads in prayer. Tanner liked to capture the "everyday activities of ordinary people" (Lewis 47). It is amazing to see these two people who have been kept as slaves, then released to a life of poverty and segregation, still being thankful for what they have.

The early twentieth century brought about new changes in the character of African Americans, which can be seen with the emergence of the "New Negro." As Neil Irvin Painter, author of *Creating Black Americans* states, "The 'New Negro' of the period during and after the First World War was self-confident, urban, and Northern. Earlier stereotypes of 'the Negro' depicted rural Southerners full of Southern humility and deference to white people, signs of an acceptance of black inferiority. The figure of the new Negro of the early twentieth century denied charges of racial inferiority. He- for the race was still envisioned as one man- was proud to be a Negro. He fought back when attacked and proclaimed pride in his race. The New Nergo emerged from his times" (189).

Viewing the "New Negro" as a self-confident, urban, and Northern individual inspired many African Americans to migrate to the North. The Great Migration, which took place from 1916 to 1919 resulted in more the 500,000 African Americans leaving the South. Painter conveys, "It suddenly multiplied the black population in cities where African Americans had hardly been noticed before." Cities such as Cleveland and Detroit more than tripled their percentage of African American population (Painter 191). This newly found sense of culture, confidence, and pride reflected in the artwork of the Harlem Renaissance.

Beginning in the 1920's and continuing to the 1950's, the Harlem Renaissance marked an era in African art. McElroy claims, "The art of black Americans underwent numerous changes between 1920 and 1950. These changes in aesthetic points of views and degrees of racial and cultural consciousness can be attributed to the ideological shifts within black America as a whole. It was in the period that African Americans experienced spells of heightened self-awareness and optimism about the future, as well as moments of despair and disillusionment concerning their role in American society" (41). The art of the Harlem Renaissance revolved around "realism, ethnic consciousness, and Americanism" (Lewis 59). This art movement was very notable because white Americans did not believe that African Americans could be successful at making art, and they were not creating work of the same style that was popular with European Americans of the time. African Americans proved everyone wrong and came up with a style all of their own. This movement was also quite notable because the artists of this time were struggling, along with all of the United States, with the Depression of the 1930's, which took place in the middle of the Harlem Renaissance. This movement was lead by Aaron Douglas.

Aaron Douglas gained a degree from University of Nebraska and taught for a year following his graduation, but discovered that was not his calling. Instead he joined a group of realist painters and began adding geometric African style shapes to his paintings. He hoped this would express his "racial commitment" in his art. In his piece *The Creation*

(Fig. 8), Douglas is able to explore the visual representation of the creation of man in a very distinct style. The background of the work contains rolling waves in muted tones, along with geometric, seemingly transparent circles. In the foreground a man stands amidst free flowing mountains and a very organic shaped plant. The man stands appearing as a silhouette with very square, geometric shoulders. In the sky is what appears to be a very abstract hand, although it is made up of only organic shapes, and is not defined by fingers or minute details. It looks as though early African art has been redefined, and used in an improved way, along with new techniques to deal with significant issues of the time, or in this case religious events from the past.

The bright colors of Palmer Hayden's watercolor piece, *The Subway* from 1930 (Fig. 9), instantly draw the viewers in. It also is a distinctive Harlem Renaissance piece, but has a very different subject matter and style. The subject in the work is Americanism. The painting is a small portion of the inside of a subway car. A very dark skinned African American man stands holding onto a handrail, next to him stands a mixed race African American, also holding onto the same handrail, almost in companionship, or support. Meanwhile, a white lady glares at the two men from across the car with disapproving eyes, and two other white people stand within reach of the handrail, but holding on to nothing, as if they refuse to touch the same handrail as a person of color. The problems of discrimination in America were beginning to be pointed out, as they were in this artwork, and soon action would be taken to put an end to the prejudice.

The Harlem Renaissance did not only revolve around art. Literature and music were also advancing in African American culture during this time. An example of the mixing of literature and art in the Harlem Renaissance can be seen in Charles Alston's piece from 1934 entitled *Girl in a Red Dress* (Fig. 10). The artist abandoned old beliefs that the standard of beauty lied within European features. Alston found African features to be a standard of beauty and pride (McElroy 53). The girl in this painting appears to be tired, and looks as though she has had a hard life. Her face is fixed in an expression of anger, and maybe even meanness. However, if the viewer looks closely there is also a hint of serenity and contentment in the young face. She wears a bright, beautiful red dress with pride. The piece was made for African American poet Langston Hughes' poem *When Sue Wears Red*, in which the final lines of the poem read, "And the beauty of Susanna Jones in red, Burns in my heart a love-fire sharp like pain." ('Poetry by Langston Hughes').

The new confidence and self-reliance that African Americans gained through success of their art and the knowledge that they have gained is shown to its fullest during the Civil Rights Movement. The first big stride for the Civil Rights Movement was the ruling of the Brown vs. Board of Education Movement in the early 1950's. This ruling stated that 'Separate but Equal' laws were unjust. It was discovered that the African-American students were not getting the equal amount of education as their white counterparts. Thus, the United States began the slow road to desegregation. (Williams).

Many of the white citizens of the United States felt angered at the introduction of desegregation, and felt the need to stop the process. White citizens began to act out upon African-Americans, and continued segregation in every way possible. However, many African-Americans had new courage to stand up for themselves as they saw hope for change. While being beaten and battered by their white counterparts, African-Americans

kept the Civil Rights Movement non-violent. Instead they arranged sit-ins, boycotts, and marches to protest the unjust treatment of their race. An example of this is Rosa Park's initiation of the bus boycott.

"On December 1, 1955, Rosa Parks, the 'mother of the Civil Rights Movement,' refused to get up out of her seat on a public bus to make room for a white passenger. Parks was arrested, tried, and convicted for disorderly conduct and violating a local ordinance. After word of this incident reached the black community, 50 African-American leaders gathered and organized the Montgomery Bus Boycott to protest the segregation of blacks and whites on public buses. The boycott lasted for 381 days until the local ordinance segregating African-Americans and whites on public buses was lifted" (Williams). It is amazing that the African-Americans were so strong that they would walk miles to work, instead of riding the bus, to prove that the way they were treated on the buses was wrong. Without using violence, African-Americans were able to make a difference by decreasing the bus revenue by 60 percent!

African-Americans became more prevalent, sitting-in on restaurants that refused to serve them, not leaving no matter what the owner threatened. They were also brave enough to attend schools where they were allowed, but not welcomed. Each step without violence. On August 28, 1963 the African-American peoples arranged a march on Washington, DC. It was during this time that Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., delivered his famous "I Have a Dream" speech. (Williams). This was undoubtedly the height of the Civil Rights Movement. Finally, in 1964 a law was passed banning discrimination in work places, public accommodations, and schools. This was followed in 1965 with the Voting Rights Act, which allowed African Americans to vote in the United States.

Although there was so much change going on in the black community during this time, it is interesting to note that, "In Art History specifically, there has been little investigation into the Civil Rights Era. There is even less evaluation of art works created by black artists during this period, and of how the politics of the period influenced their art forms… The voices of African-American artists who were creating during the fifties and sixties were effectively muzzled" (Jamie-Horry 3). It is unfortunate that at such an innovative period, revolving around new freedoms, new emotions, yet continued resentment is not properly researched and documented. There is definitely not an abundance of accessible African-American art from this era; however, the subject of the artworks that are available is very clear.

Artists such as Joe Overstreet were affected by the ideas of segregation and racism that blacks were experiencing during the 1960's, and it was reflected in their artwork. Overstreet was enthusiastic to be an artist. He was exploring opportunities such as applying at Disney Studios in California in 1953. Overstreet believed that he was not given a fair opportunity, and was turned away because of his color. "From his experiences at Disney Studios, he began to realize the difficulty of his goal to become a painter. Racism was present not only in the animated film industry, but also in the fine arts world. Overstreet recalls meeting with Mark Rothko, Franz Kline, Jackson Pollock, and William DeKooning in New York City bars and realizing that the art world would never open up to him, or any other black artist. Many black artists experienced restriction and rejection during the fifties and sixties" (Jamie-Horry 16).

Overstreet did not give up on art just because he was rejected by the white community. Instead, he created pieces revolving around racism, and life issues that he has encountered. In his piece, *The New Jemima*, 1964 (Fig. 11) shows the character of Aunt Jemima, who Americans are used to seeing as the lady who cooks, cleans, serves, and acts in a motherly role for the children, in a different light. The piece is done in black and white, which creates a very somber mood. Jemima, a lady who the artist depicts as being filled with black pride, is holding a very large gun, and has a look of satisfaction on her face. This shows that Overstreet felt that some sort of revenge should take place for all of the hurt and sorrow that existed in his, and his family's past. Although the piece is very serious, Overstreet is able to ad a humorous touch by showing Aunt Jemima's pancakes flying through the air in this tense situation.

Inspired by the Civil Rights Movement, Feminism began to flourish in the United States. Women began to realize that just as African Americans were being suppressed, women were also given the notion that they were inferior to males. From the mid 1960's to the late 1980's women fought to change society's views on male superiority. During this time women challenged the stereotypes that held them back, and began to realize that they could achieve more than staying home to be a wife and a mother. Women's rights were even included in the Civil Rights Act of 1964. As stated by this law, "It shall be unlawful employment practice for an employer to fail or refuse to hire or to discharge any individual or otherwise to discriminate against any individual with respect to his compensation, terms, conditions, or privileges of employment, because of such individual's race, color, religion, sex, or national origin" ('Title IV'). Aside from the work force, women also focused their efforts on topics such as freedom of choice, which included a spread of contraceptives, abortion, and divorce. The idea of "Women's Liberation" became widespread.

The Feminist movement seems as though it should have been an exciting time for African American women artists, however, it was not. The feminist movement was focused mainly on European American women, who snobbed African American women in their efforts. Betye Saar, an African American woman artist of the time, recalls, "It was as if we were invisible again, the white women did not support us" (Farrington 148). This left the African American women with a tough choice. They must choose between joining the feminist movement, where they were not properly represented, but were able to progress, or staying with the black American movement, which had already proven to be successful. Betye Saar chose to stay with the black liberation movement.

Saar's artwork is very meaningful to the black liberation movement because her pieces are filled with relics from the past. The majority of her work is created by assembling remnants from when the Jim Crowe laws were enforced. The items that she uses in her pieces are able to show the demeaning nature of segregation.

Similar to Joe Overstreet, Betye Saar also dealt with the stereotype of Aunt Jemima. Her mixed media work, *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima* (Fig.12), holds many symbolic references. In the background stands a strong black woman. In one hand she holds a broom, signifying the past. In the other hand is a rifle, symbol of the new strength that this woman has, and her ability to fight back if she is mistreated, or possibly the defense against the reoccurring racism that feminism brought about. In front of the statuesque

figure is a painting of a black woman holding a baby. According to Frances K. Pohl, author of *Framing America: a Social History of American Art*, the baby is a mulatto baby, it is "an indication of the sexual enslavement of black women" (478). In the very foreground of the artwork is a black fist, the undeniable symbol for black pride. This piece truly shows the great struggle that African Americans have experienced, yet also holds a sense of pride.

In the 1970's, new ideas of cultural pride, starting new, and improving life quality of the African Americans took root, extinguishing ideas of revenge and sorrow.

An artist who portrays the idea of cultural pride is Charles Searles. His artwork revolves around "life experiences, therefore emphasizing education, self-respect, and concentration on the solution in his art forms. These, Searles has come to believe, are the necessary factors for improvement of the position of the African-American" (Jamie-Horry 12).

Searles' artwork is very vibrant and alive with rich, energizing colors. The mood is very happy. His piece *Celebration* from 1975 (Fig. 13) shows a group of people who are proud of their heritage and overcome with joy. With bright yellows, oranges, reds, and blues Searles depicts a cheerful gathering. In the back of the artwork is a set of bongo drums, supplying a rhythm for the piece. With the dancers depicted in the foreground, the viewer can just imagine what the music might sound like. It is amazing to think that someone who has overcome such hardship and unjust treatment in his life could make something so beautiful and cheerful. Searles must have experienced this abundance of joy at some point in his life because he feels that, "artists cannot create works that are not influenced by occurrences faced during their lifetime. 'All [of] your experiences make you what you are'" (Jamie-Horry 12).

Another artist who believed in portraying a sense of culture was Ed Wilson Jr. His piece *Jazz Musicians* from 1984 (Fig.14) shows the progression of the African American culture. This bronze relief shows lively musicians playing various instruments - drums, saxophone, trumpet; all instruments which are traditional to jazz music. Wilson was inspired by jazz music because "He sees black jazz musician as evolving, relaying individual experiences and the history of a people. These artists have developed, modifying musical-melodic structure and rhythm in order to musically document various black social experiences. For example, the migration from the South to the Northern cities introduces some change in music" (Jamie-Horry 14). For Wilson, jazz music is a large part of his culture, and a great influence on his art, along with the ideas of freedom and movement. During the Civil Rights Movement Wilson was involved in organizing protests and sit-ins and challenging segregation and legal racism. It is amazing to see how these factors just contributed to his sense of cultural pride instead of resentment of whites through his artwork. Wilson states that in order to move forward, " The American Negro, whether he is an artist or not, has to get over his self-consciousness of being black. He has to forget the put-down of the 'Tarzan' pictures and see the real potential of African and other black people. Also one's self-image has to be expanded before one can accommodate an outside image intelligently. I feel that the education of the American artist, whether he is black or white, should include exposure to African art, American jazz and the psycho-social dynamics of the American scene. There is a strange vitality

fermenting under this racial tension in America and I want to see it erupt" (Wilson). This was an innovative, intelligent way to look at the situation.

With evolving times, the artwork of many African American artists continues to focus on political and social injustice. Although the focus is no longer solely on racism, there continues to be discrimination in the United States against interracial couples, as well as a deep intolerance for homosexuality. An artist who explores these issues is Renee Cox. According to Farrington, author of *Creating Their Own Image, "The People's Project* propels Cox beyond the era of conceptualism and black consciousness into a contemporary age of eclecticism and broader concepts of human identity. Comprised of Asians, Caucasians, and African-Americans, multiracial and same sex couples, the series offers redefinition of the Other that includes virtually everyone in a reappraisal of race" (227). It is interesting that Cox is striving for equality among everyone in the United States, not just a particular social group to which she belongs.

Renee Cox's piece *Untitled #9* from *The People's Project*, 2000 (Fig. 15) is very striking. An African American woman stands in the foreground of the piece, with her arms intertwined with a Caucasian male who stands behind her. The piece is not only socially valuable because of its representation of the interracial couples, but it also contains beautiful aesthetics. The contrast of the woman's dark skin adjacent to the pale white skin of the male complement one another. The shadows on the figures blend into the dark background, so the viewer cannot tell where one stops and the other begins. The two figures seem to stand as one.

Today African Americans continue to create new, exciting work. It is amazing to think that it has been less than 50 years since the end of the Civil Rights Movement, and many of the people who have experienced that are still alive and making art today. Their life experiences and childhood memories are so valuable. It was such a hurtful, unjust past, but joyous outlook for equality in the future. As Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. continues, "We cannot walk alone. And as we walk we must make the pledge that we shall march ahead. We cannot turn back" (King 361).

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