

PRESENTATION OF AFRICAN AMERICAN EXHIBITION

One of the easiest ways to present this show is to respond to the 3 major historic periods which are represented. The first, 1880-1920, is hung in the RFB room; the second, 1920-1950, is shown along the balcony up to and including the slanted wall; the third, and by far the largest section in the entire large upstairs gallery which contains works 1950-1987. Other than practical reasons, this presentation is suggested by the fact that the content and style of the works has been greatly affected by historical events.

1880-1920

Emancipation led to more opportunities for black artists, yet there was still limited access to patronage and art school. During this period, there was a beginning of the migration from the rural south to the urban north. Some black artists gained support from Abolitionists, but this support was not widespread. Generally, black artists seemed to be imitating subjects and techniques of white artists. Challenge students to consider why this was so:

1. nothing in their experience prepared them to paint in the white European 2-D canvas style. Ie. their African roots were in sculpture, folk art, wood carving.
2. there was virtually no market for art which reflected the black experience (ie. there were not many middle class blacks to buy the product); patronage was still minimal; museums didn't collect;
3. those lucky enough to study with a teacher, studied with a white teacher and naturally imitated what they saw (this has always been the way artists have learned)

One trick to getting students to look at this section is to ask them to scan the room and identify which work doesn't seem to belong. They may come up with any number of answers which is fine, but the hoped-for one would be the Addison Scurlock Portrait of Mrs. Johnson (a photograph). This is the only work which has a hint of "black" connection--in this case, the subject is black as well as the photographer. All the other works could well have been done by an artist of any color.

It is also interesting to compare the work of Harper and Tanner and Bannister with comparable works in the 2c/2c show.

1920-1950

This was a period of vast change in the US socially, economically and spiritually. Major events such as World War I, the mass migration of rural southern blacks to the urban north, the Depression and WPA programs, World War II, the presidency of FDR, with all the resulting socio-economic changes had a profound effect on the visual vocabulary of black American artists.

The Harlem Renaissance, which occurred between 1919-1929, was a movement which brought together black artists in many disciplines--musicians, painters, sculptors, poets, novelists, dramatists. Although there was not a specific style they all shared, Harlem Renaissance artists each responded to the new freedoms and interest in black life, history and culture. For the first time, black artists turned to blacks and their culture as a source of imagery. As the poet Langston Hughes said, "Harlem was in vogue." Harlem was the capitol of Black Culture.

Challenge students to imagine why World War I and the mass migration north would have affected black artists:

1. the war afforded blacks an opportunity to travel, see the world and develop an awareness of Africa
2. war economy encouraged many more blacks to leave the rural south in search of the plentiful jobs in industry in the urban north
3. leaving the old social atmosphere, associating with many other blacks, created a new freedom from old 'tapes'
4. opportunities for the rise of many black organizations arose: NAACP 1909, Urban League 1910, UNIA (Universal Negro Improvement Association headed by Marcus Garvey whose goal was to repatriate blacks to Africa)
5. concentration of blacks in NYC led to community consciousness, black pride
6. rise of eloquent black spokesmen--Alain Locke served as catalyst
7. rise of actual \$\$ support for black artists for first time, as well as opportunity to show works: Alain Locke convinced a rich white philanthropist, Harmon, to establish a foundation to assist black artists. This foundation sponsored all-black Art shows 1928-
8. Howard U. opened an art gallery in 1930 affording black artists a place to study as well as exhibit their work.

Contrast the work in RBF with the work along the balcony. Have students identify works clearly by blacks and about blacks. It may be useful to think about the different kinds of preoccupations black artists had:

1. Idealizing: Barthe, Aaron Douglas (Aspiration), Charles Alston (Girl in Red Dress),
2. Genre, Black Everyday scenes, social realism: Wells (Negro Worker), Rex Gortie (Planting), Clementine Hunter (Pole Watchers), Jacob Lawrence (Graduation). (this latter was done as an illustration for a poem by Langston Hughes in One Way Ticket).
3. Africa as cultural root: Lois Mailou Jones (The Lovers)

1950-1987

Following World War II, black artists seemed to have more liberty to make choices about the subjects they chose to depict as well as the styles of art employed. Two people, Alain Locke and James Porter, seemed to have set the agenda. Locke, was a firm advocate of blacks seeking their African roots, exploring black subject matter. Porter (who published Modern Negro Art in 1943 which formed the basis of most scholarship on African American art) chaired the first black art school at Howard U. He advocated the development of personal expression erasing the distinctions of race. You can see from the diversity of the art in the large gallery upstairs that many black artists joined the mainstream of 20th century art movements (such as color field painting, abstract expressionism, pop, op, kinetic, minimalist, conceptualism). Other artists chose to keep the issue of their race as an issue of their art, favoring either social realism, figurative, or social commentary, or Africa as source of imagery.

AFRICA Irene Clark. African Jail
Social Realism Elizabeth Catlett. Sharecropper
Social commentary Hughie Lee-Smith. Reflection
social commentary Ulysses Marshall. Sunshine Meets the Man
Africa Frank E. Smith. River of Darkness
Africa Barbara Tyson-Mosley. Infant Garment
Social commentary/figurative Charles White. Sound of Silence.