

The Routledge Companion to African American Art History



Edited by Eddie Chambers

THE ROUTLEDGE COMPANION TO AFRICAN AMERICAN ART HISTORY

This Companion authoritatively section to the main areas of enquiry within the subject of African American art history. The first section examines how African American art has been constructed over the course of a century of published scholarship. The second section studies how African American art is and has been taught and researched in academia. The third section focuses on how African American art has been reflected in art galleries and museums. The final section opens up understandings of what we mean when we speak of African American art. This book will be of interest to graduate students, researchers, and professors and may be used in American art, African American art, visual culture, and culture classes.

Eddie Chambers is Professor in the Department of Art and Art History, at the University of Texas, Austin.

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INTRODUCTION

African American art is a term or a category that should rightly come with a range of necessary caveats. Until relatively recently, the term could largely be understood as relating to the art of African America, the art made by black American artists; the latest incarnation of a nomenclatural trajectory that began with *Negro Art*, before progressing, some decades later, to *Afro American Art*, and then in more recent decades, on to *African American Art*, taking in *Black American Art* along the way. But to fully appreciate the complications of the category, we need to draw in a range of factors that in many respects expose its most pronounced fissures. We likely each think we know what we mean when we refer to African American art and its history, but upon closer inspection any supposed certainties about these constructs start to dissipate. What, after all, is the relationship between artists who might individually describe themselves as African American, and the mass noun, African American Art? Given that so much art practice is pursued by individuals decidedly not operating in concert with each other, what are we to make of books, exhibitions, catalogues, museum sections, and so on, in which African American artists are treated and regarded as some sort of logical, recognizable, distinctive, self-referencing *whole*? Outside of the strident utterances of advocates of the Black Arts Movement, we can imagine a great many artists having degrees of ambivalence as to the imposition of an art world classificatory label such as *African American*. Perhaps it's the loaded and *raced* prefix of *African* which is a chief contention. After all, to signify an artist as African American is quite different from signifying that same artist as *American*, if he or she is American by birth, citizenship, or residence. What is at stake if we embrace or maintain use of the term African American art and what is at stake if we were to actively resist it? What are the consequences and implications of a continued use of the term, resting as it does on a range of presumptions and assumptions?

Perhaps these questions are inevitably located within the wider vexation of *race* in the United States. While being proud of themselves, their histories, their cultures, and their identities, the struggles of so many African Americans, over the course of centuries, have been to escape the imposition of labels and categories seemingly predetermined by the dominant society, and instead, to function, to live, to succeed, as *Americans*. From time to time, curators and art historians have sought to deemphasize the inevitability of the *raced* prefix in their consideration of certain artists. In this regard, we can consider a volume such as Ellen Harkins Wheat's *Jacob Lawrence: American Painter* (University of Washington Press, 1990). Perhaps an even more deliberate, or audacious example might be the *30 Americans* exhibition, that was on show in

2019 at the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art. With its substantial catalogue, *30 Americans* presented work drawn from the Rubell Family Collection, and could chiefly be read as a body of work that presented American experiences as told from the contrasting perspectives and practices of 30 African American artists including Jean-Michel Basquiat, Rashid Johnson, Kerry James Marshall, Mickalene Thomas, Hank Willis Thomas, Kara Walker, Carrie Mae Weems, and Kehinde Wiley. *30 Americans* was so much more loaded, nuanced and provocative a title than *30 African Americans*. At other times, curators and art historians have sought to emphasize and name the proximity of African American artists to modernism, in an attempt to challenge the dominant culture's inclination to regard the history of modernism as somehow having little to nothing to do with the country's, or the world's darker peoples. In this regard, we can consider volumes such as *Sargent Johnson: African American Modernist*, a catalogue published on the occasion of an exhibition organized by Lizzetta LeFalle-Collins held at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 1998; or *William H. Johnson: Revisiting an African American Modernist*, North Carolina Central University Art Museum, Durham, NC, 2006; or Susan Earle's *Aaron Douglas: African American Modernist*, published by Yale University Press, New Haven/Spencer Museum of Art, The University of Kansas, Lawrence, 2007. As important as such attempts are, there is little getting away from the dispiriting inevitability that too frequently, modernism itself is presumed to be the preserve of white people, just as surely as history has shown us that African American artists have been frequently, invariably, and primarily categorized as such, irrespective of the nature of their individual practices. A painting or a sculpture of an African American person (and even more so, the visualizing of a group of African American people) has been more than enough for the dominant culture to racially designate the maker. Needless to say, a painting or a sculpture of a white person (and even more so, the visualizing of a group of white people) has been more than enough for the dominant culture to elevate the maker to the relatively untroubled and untroubling *deracialized* designation of *American*. In so many respects, the histories of African American art history reflect these problematics. For far too many decades, the imposition of the label African American has been sufficient to nudge or assign to said makers varying degrees of marginality or invisibility, while their white counterparts have remained unencumbered by such pathologies.

Within academia in the United States, the struggle to create a credible and legitimate space for the study of African American art history, not much beyond the broader and more general realm of art history, has, to an extent, been won. African American art and its history are no longer widely perceived as marginal, obscure, almost esoteric subjects. At least, in part, this recognition and embrace of the study of African American art has been aided by the publication of many books and catalogs dedicated to the topic. While pioneering advocates of African American art and its histories such as Alain Locke and James A. Porter offered early studies that aimed at a comprehensiveness, these volumes have, since the 1960s, been joined by a number of other notable publications, the numbers of which have, decade upon decade, increased substantially.¹ It now seems astonishing that as late as 1967, Louie Robinson, writing in *Ebony* magazine could note (in a feature on Charles White):

The publication of [White's] *Images of Dignity* alone is a singular achievement. No other living Negro artist has ever had a book of his works published (a collection of the art of the late Horace Pippin appeared in print after his death).²

A broad range of publications relating to various aspects of African American art have been published over the course of the past several decades, and now the collective weight of this scholarship is substantial. What might the amassed assortment of this scholarship tell us about

the current or speculative future trajectories of African American artists as individual practitioners? Studies from the 1930s and 1940s such as those offered by Locke and Porter had as their parameters a clearly defined body of practitioners resident within the United States, from the centuries of the enslavement of Africans in the Americas, up until the early to mid-twentieth century. Referring as these studies did to *Negro Art Past and Present* (Associates in Negro Folk Education, Washington DC, 1936), *The Negro in Art: A Pictorial Record of the Negro Artist and the Negro Theme in Art* (Associates in Negro Folk Education, Washington DC, 1940), and *Modern Negro Art* (Dryden Press, 1943), we are left in no doubt as to the ethnicities or racial identities of the artists chronicled. Indeed, the category *Negro artist* (understood to be Negro/Black/Afro American/African American artists, American by birth or location) was in widespread use until the late 1960s. Such parameters were maintained and utilized by subsequent scholars, who brought into existence a range of publications looking to update the foundational work undertaken by the likes of Locke and Porter. In this respect, key texts included Cedric Dover's *American Negro Art* (New York Graphic Society, 1960); Judith Wragg Chase's *Afro-American Art and Craft* (Van Nostrand Reinhold Co., 1971); Elsa Honig Fine's *The Afro-American Artist: A Search for Identity* (Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1973); Samella Lewis' *Art: African American* (Harcourt College Publishers, 1978); Romare Bearden and Harry Henderson's *A History of African-American Artists: From 1792 to the Present* (Pantheon, 1993); and Sharon F. Patton's *African-American Art* (Oxford University Press, 1998). Perhaps one of the most recent version of such texts, demonstrating and reflecting a pronounced historical arc, was Celeste-Marie Bernier's *African American Visual Arts: From Slavery to the Present* (University of North Carolina Press, 2009), although Bernier, much to her credit took a particularly innovative approach to the ways in which she treated the artists in her study. David Driskell's *Two Centuries of Black American Art* (Los Angeles County Museum of Art and Albert A. Knopf, 1976) offered overviews similar to a number of the books mentioned here. Given the formidable nature of the privileging of white American artists in no end of published histories of American Art, the previously mentioned books frequently, or primarily, functioned as corrective studies, meant to challenge the pronounced eurocentrism of publishing on American Art, rescue practitioners from varying degrees of obscurity, and chronicle the often pioneering, innovative, and original practices of African American artists, or artists who declared themselves as, or who happened to be, African American.

Notwithstanding the caliber of some of these publications, they tended to employ a certain plodding logic, as regards the chronological timelines they employed, and the perceived or assigned ethnicities of the artists they discussed. Perhaps the bluntness of the titling and structured content of some of these books can be attributed to the systemic absences of African American artists from books on American Art, which have tended to presuppose *American* artists to be white, and for the most part, overwhelmingly male. Time and again, African American artists have found themselves being treated as appendages to or within American Art publications, though in a great many instances, they are simply rendered conspicuous by their absence. This erasure or marginalizing is evident in books on subjects ranging from art from the colonial period, right through to the art of more recent times. This means that African American art is not often read as contributing to, or defining, various art movements such as Color Field Painting, Abstract Expressionism, Body Art, Conceptual Art, American Impressionism, and so on. Rather than being read as American art history per se, African American art is instead frequently perceived as a foreign locus of cultural practice occasionally to be located – often-times ahistorically – within American art, in much the same problematic way in which Native American art is frequently viewed. In sum, much of the scholarship generated in the wake of the pioneering studies of the 1930s and 1940s can be regarded as existing as corrective measures,

or existing to counter the seemingly systemic and willful setting to one side, or overlooking, of African American artists and their histories, particularly when such histories relate directly to the sorts of art movements mentioned above.

There is in so many respects compelling need for corrective scholarship, or at least, scholarship that attends to that which might otherwise be wholly ignored, or only partially attended to. In 2004 Routledge published James Elkins' *On the Strange Place of Religion in Contemporary Art*. The blurb on the book jacket made the claim, "Religion and serious art have grown apart." The most cursory examination of African American art of the twentieth century would be enough to rebut Elkins' claim, given the centrality of religious expression in the art ranging from Archibald J. Motley Jr. and Aaron Douglas to Charles White and Jacob Lawrence. Yet Elkins' book referenced, in passing, work by few African American artists, such as William J. Blackmon, James Hampton, and Betye Saar. Those reading Elkins' book may well have been surprised or delighted with the publication, in 2017, of *Beholding Christ and Christianity in African American Art*, edited by James Romaine and Phoebe Wolfskill. Several contributors to this *Routledge Companion* were also represented by essays in *Beholding Christ and Christianity*, among them, Kymberley Pinder, whose text in this volume is "Black Grace: The Religious Impulse in African American Art." Romaine and Wolfskill's book not only acted as a corrective to the partiality of scholarship such as *On the Strange Place of Religion in Contemporary Art*, but simultaneously offered authoritative and fascinating essays that demonstrated that if anything, religion and serious art have, for many African American artists, gone hand in hand. Alas, such systemic omissions of the art historical contributions by African American artists are commonplace and range from the irksome and tiresome to the offensive and downright disrespectful. It might well be case that publishers and commissioning editors are in the dock, along with other ne'er-do-wells.

Whilst published studies of Caribbean art (and publications accompanying exhibitions of Caribbean art) have tended to be noticeably elastic in their definitions of who is a Caribbean artist and/or what is Caribbean art, the range of published scholarship and historical survey exhibitions of African American art that have taken place over many decades have contained little or none of this elasticity in their discourse. The first study to deviate from most of the publications mentioned above was Richard J. Powell's *Black Art and Culture in the 20th Century* (Thames & Hudson, 1997, reprinted as *Black Art: A Cultural History*, in 2003). It might be surprising that (given that it was published toward the close of the twentieth century) this was the first book to create a dialogue between the work of African American artists and wider considerations of the construction of images of black people within mainstream U.S. visual culture. Given that so much of African American art practice existed to counter or challenge problematic white depictions of black people (as well as a marginalizing of the black artist) the approach that Powell took to his study was in many respects long overdue.

Equally as importantly, Powell's book was the first of its kind to challenge the seemingly hermetic seals around the notion of African American art. He did this by broadening his study to include a handful of black British artists, such as Martina Attille, Tam Joseph, and Keith Piper; several Caribbean-born artists, such as Albert Chong and Keith Morrison (both Jamaica) and Frank Bowling (Guyana); African artists such as Uzo Egonu and Gerard Sekoto (Nigeria and South Africa, respectively); and white artists such as Sue Coe and Paul Colin (United Kingdom and France, respectively).³ Thus, Powell's book, in contrast to those studies that went before it, challenged the traditional ways in which African American art history is presented as being entirely different from, and not connected to, the histories of modern and contemporary art practices in Africa and the Caribbean, let alone the histories of modern and contemporary art practices in the United States. Furthermore, Powell's study disrupted traditional readings of

American Art, by bringing into its arguments the work of white American artists such as Larry Rivers and Robert Mapplethorpe.

With its necessarily textured and complex narrative—made all the more fascinating for its attempts to break with the parochial conventions set up by some previous studies—Powell's book encouraged its readers to complicate understandings of the emphatic categories that are reflected in studies of African American art from the mid-twentieth century onward. African American art has never taken place in hermetically sealed bubbles, without recourse to wider American visual culture, or wider considerations of particular art movements, yet until Powell's study, the dominant histories of African American art have frequently paid little or no attention to such factors. Exhibition histories of African American art show that, on occasion, the *Caribbeaness* of artists such as Renée Cox and Frank Bowling has either not occurred to curators, or it has been deemed of no great significance, thereby ensuring that exhibitions take place in which the category of African American art, or the presumed identity of exhibitors as African American remains untroubled. *The Search for Freedom: African American Abstract Painting 1945–1975*, was a hugely important exhibition that took place at Kenkeleba Gallery, New York, May 19–July 14, 1991. Whilst the exhibition, which featured some 35 artists, was subtitled *African American Abstract Painting 1945–1975*, two of the artists were in fact Caribbean born: Ronald Joseph, from St. Kitts and the British artist Frank Bowling, born in Guyana. This privileging of African Americanness goes back a long way, with a pioneering nineteenth-century painter such as Edward Bannister routinely taken to be American, when he was born in Canada (St. Andrews, New Brunswick) and spent the first two decades or so of his life there.

To an extent, hegemonic constructions of African American art are perhaps a consequence of the ways in which, in U.S. academia, many subjects with *African American* as a prefix are regularly regarded, taught, and constructed as entities in and of themselves. Consequently, the insularity with which African American art has been somewhat routinely constructed is widely reflected beyond the field of art history. Interestingly, within the realm of exhibition activity, it has taken British (rather than American) endeavors to pluralize and complicate dominant understandings of African American art history. In this regard, we can consider two exhibitions in particular: *Back to Black*, from 2005 and *Afro Modern*, from 2010. Curated by Tanya Barson, *Afro Modern: Journeys through the Black Atlantic* was a major exhibition that took place at Tate Liverpool in the spring of 2010.⁴ Using a compelling theoretical framing proposed by British academic Paul Gilroy, the exhibition set out to explore

the impact of different black cultures from around the Atlantic on art from the early twentieth-century to today. The exhibition takes its inspiration from Paul Gilroy's influential book *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* published in 1993.

... Gilroy used the term 'The Black Atlantic' to describe the transmission of black cultures around the Atlantic, and the instances of cultural hybridity, that occurred as a result of transatlantic slavery and its legacy.

Afro Modern: Journeys through the Black Atlantic reflects Gilroy's idea of the Atlantic Ocean as a 'continent in negative', offering a network connecting Africa, North and South America, the Caribbean and Europe. It traces both real and imagined routes taken across the Atlantic, and highlights artistic links and dialogues from the early twentieth-century to today.

... Charting new forms of art arising from black culture and the work of black artists and intellectuals, it opens up an alternative, transatlantic reading of modernism and contemporary culture.⁵

Not only did the exhibition assert an insistent interplay between black artists of the wider African Diaspora, it underscored a similar interplay between these artists and white European artists such as Man Ray and Picasso. Consequently, African American artists such as Jean-Michel Basquiat, Aaron Douglas, Ellen Gallagher, and Glenn Ligon found themselves keeping curatorial company with the likes of the aforementioned Man Ray and Pablo Picasso, with artists such as Candice Breitz (from South Africa) and Frank Bowling also in the mix. Barson threw into sharp relief and shone a spotlight on, the insularity with which African American art has routinely been constructed.

The same might be said of 2005's *Back to Black: Art, Cinema and the Racial Imagery*, held at the Whitechapel Art Gallery in London.⁶ The exhibition (curated by Richard J. Powell, David A. Bailey, and Petrine Archer-Straw) took as its central area of interest the American Black Arts Movement and its interplay with corresponding impulses elsewhere in the world. It focused

on the rise of the Black Arts Movement in the US, Britain and Jamaica in the 1960s & 1970s, bringing together over forty artists whose work defined the emergence of a radical & powerful aesthetic. Their work testifies to a complex & widespread range of influences, breathtaking in their geographic, temporal and cultural sweep. African symbols & traditions blend with images of contemporary life; the symbols of radical, militant activism with an imagined Afrofuturism. Played out across the broad cultural spectrum to encompass the visual arts, film, music & fashion, their work reveals a common visual language shared among artists across the Black Atlantic, and profoundly influential to subsequent generations. We hope the exhibition will address a lacuna in standard narratives of modern and contemporary visual culture by contributing a scholarly understanding of this important black cultural legacy.⁷

And so it was that it took British endeavors (albeit one of them utilizing the expertise of U.S. academic Richard J. Powell) to internationally pluralize two of the most significant and important periods of arts activity to come out of (black) America – the Harlem Renaissance and the Black Arts Movement. Credit should be given to these exhibitions—*Back to Black* and *Afro Modern*—for their attempts to diversify, both within the gallery space and the exhibition catalog, the ways in which these two movements are traditionally read (that is, as “American” cultural movements that owe little or nothing to artists or happenings that lay beyond the continental United States).

In this respect, an exhibition such as the Studio Museum's *Fore*,⁸ which examined art's relationship to U.S. and global communities, is perhaps the clearest manifestation, within the United States, of seeking to pluralize hegemonic notions of African American art. Rather than utilize the perhaps inadequate or limiting term *African American* to describe the exhibition's practitioners, the Studio Museum instead referred to the exhibitors as “artists of African descent who live and work across the United States”—on the face of it the language might just appear more wordy, but it was precisely what was needed to describe *Fore*'s artists. *Fore* was one of the museum's series of *F* word shows, following *Freestyle*, 2001; *Frequency*, 2005–2006; and *Flow*, 2008. A discrete but nevertheless important aspect of *Fore* and its predecessors was the extent to which dominant definitions of the contemporary African American artist were disrupted; the dominant definition being, as suggested earlier, a decidedly insular one.⁹

Fore revealed the extent to which the very notion of African American art has been disrupted by a new generation of artists for whom old-fashioned borders no longer neatly apply. Of the nearly thirty artists in the exhibition, one was born in Santiago, Dominican Republic, and lived in New York; one was born in Prince George's County, Maryland, and lived in New York and Amsterdam;

one was born in Ife, Nigeria, and lived in San Francisco, California; and one was born in Kigali, Rwanda, and lived in New York. Curatorial strategies such as those enacted by *Fore* have had a notable effect on some of the contemporary manifestations of African American art. Wangechi Mutu very much has the appearance of being a successful American artist, though her place of birth was Nairobi, Kenya. The same can be said of Julie Mehretu, born in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

The successes of such artists have done much to necessarily complicate any understanding we might have of *African American art*. We can perhaps learn much from *Fore's* description of its artists. If *artists of African descent who live and work across the United States* was routinely used (or had, over the decades been regularly used), perhaps the difficulties we might associate with the term *African American art* would not exist, or at least, not to the same degree. As much as we might recognize the diasporic, or transnational identities of a number of the artists in an exhibition such as *Fore*, we should be mindful of the degree to which, for centuries, African American artists have reflected movement, migration, travel, and the transnational in their identities. American-born artists of the nineteenth century, such as Robert S. Duncanson and Edmonia Lewis (whose name within this Companion, appears both with and without the first name of Mary, and whose year of birth is given as either 1844 or 1845), and artists born in the twentieth century such as Barbara Chase-Riboud, Benjamin Patterson, and Ellen Gallagher have all variously spent periods of time resident in Europe, while an artist such as Elizabeth Catlett spent much of her life in Mexico. There is still much scholarship to be undertaken which addresses and pays close attention to artists such as these embodying relocated, transnational, or diasporic identities.¹⁰

As has been mentioned, African American art is, in effect, kept at arm's length from a range of relevant and highly pertinent contexts, which leads to it being presented, time and again, in relative or absolute isolation. As mentioned, there is an unavoidable sense in which some of the earlier studies presented themselves as corrective remedies—as in, there to influence and effect the presumed whiteness of American art. But we can at best see such efforts as having had only a marginal effect on academia, which (notwithstanding an earlier reference to academic struggles have at least been partially won) arguably continues to regard African American art as an optional add-on. We should also consider, as part of the issues related to the teaching of the subject, that African American art fulfills what might crudely be termed “ethnic” considerations in many institutions of higher education. Its place within curricula often has the appearance of being there to satisfy or demonstrate some sort of cursory diversifying of said curricula. The suspicion is given a particular fillip, when we consider than within a great many university art history departments, one solitary faculty member often has responsibility for teaching all things Africa-centric—as in African American art, African Diaspora art, and African art itself. This in effect means that one faculty member is tasked with teaching art throughout and across the world, going back to the beginning of time. Thus, African American art becomes, simultaneously, a field marked by its historical breadth and depth (though not widely appreciated as such), and a field marked by a certain *peripherality*.

The interrelated questions, mentioned earlier, of when (or indeed, why) should an artist be an “African American” artist and not simply, or just, an “American” artist, have been made all the more complex by the ushering in, in 2001, of the term *postblack*.¹¹ Though definitions vary, and though its precise meaning can be somewhat elusive, the term is said to encompass art that seeks to undermine the role of race within the work of black artists and yet also explore the black experience—an intriguing idea, to be sure. A measure of the reach of *postblackness* into discourses involving African American art and artists can be gleaned from a comment in the opening paragraphs of Derek Conrad Murray's book, *Queering Post-Black Art: Artists Transforming African-American Identity after Civil Rights*¹², that postblackness has “become the most talked about and debated issue in contemporary African American art.”

Even before the arrival of the term *postblack*, African American art practices had a pronounced elasticity, that complicated and challenged duller notions of African American art. Some artists have sought to question or challenge what they saw as a clumsy designation or application of heavy-handed *raced* descriptives to their work, while others have, within their work, questioned or challenged assumptions of identity vis-à-vis the work an African American artist is expected or assumed to produce. Furthermore, we now have good reason to regard identity itself as being a particularly unstable construct, that can itself be subject to all manner of elasticity and malleability, artistic or otherwise.¹³

Alongside the academy, it is within the museum/gallery that the biggest questions about the role and nature of African American art emerge. It might arguably be a given that integrated programming of African American art and artists is the most desirable and beneficial prism through which work should be viewed. But as Bridget R. Cooks set forth in her book, *Exhibiting Blackness: African Americans and the American Art Museum* (University of Massachusetts Press, 2011), the position of African American art in museums is anything but a straightforward and uncontentious matter. Displays of African American art—single pieces or entire exhibitions—invariably reveal a range of pathologies relating to race, attitudes to African Americans, presumptions about demographics, audiences, and so on.

And yet, for all the caveats relating to African American art mentioned thus far, we can rightfully regard it as a subject that is maturing and growing ever more nuanced in its multiple presences. The worthy, occasionally plodding, broad chronologies mentioned earlier are perhaps symbolic of previous, rather than current, directions of scholarship. New generations of scholars are producing work that tends to take considered and focused looks at either individual practitioners, specific museum collections, or specific art-related events arising out of specific time periods. Respectively, we can cite as evidence of these shifts in scholarship, Kirsten Pai Buick's *Child of the Fire: Mary Edmonia Lewis and the Problem of Art History's Black and Indian Subject* (Duke University Press, 2010); Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw and Richard J. Powell's *Represent: 200 Years of African American Art in the Philadelphia Museum of Art* (Philadelphia Museum of Art/Yale University Press, 2014); and Susan E. Cahan's *Mounting Frustration: The Art Museum in the Age of Black Power* (Duke University Press, 2016).

Furthermore, scholars and curators are far from finished with (re)considerations of key moments in African American art history, such as the Harlem Renaissance and the Black Arts Movement. In this regard, we can consider (again, respectively, Natalie A Mault's *The Visual Blues* (Louisiana State University Museum of Art, 2014, an exhibition which sought to explore the widespread and highly significant impact that blues and jazz music emanating from the Deep South and moving north had on artists associated with the Harlem Renaissance); and Teresa A. Carbone and Kellie Jones et. al.'s *Witness: Art and Civil Rights in the Sixties* (New York: The Monacelli Press, 2014); and, more recently, Jo-Ann Morgan's *The Black Arts Movement and the Black Panther Party in American Visual Culture* (New York and London: Routledge, 2019).

University art history departments are oftentimes the embodiment of academic whiteness, albeit in an unnamed form. Consequently, in encountering, navigating, or challenging whiteness, it is perhaps within academia that the subject of African American art, perhaps against the odds, has its most pronounced reach and application. As a concession to diversity, a number of art history departments now have Africanists, African Americanists, or African diasporaists, though these positions oftentimes exist as thinly veiled references to *black faculty*. The distinctly *raced* subject of African American art history exists, in part, to counter the dominance of the unnamed whiteness and all that it invisibilizes and marginalizes within academia. In this regard, African American art, in its most effective pedagogical forms, exists as a challenge to the dominant

academic order, and a challenge to cultural hegemony, by its impulses towards alternative and revisionist narratives, and the unearthing of willfully obscured and marginalized histories. In this regard, we need to acknowledge that it is within the Art History departments of a number of U.S. universities (and some universities further afield) that some of the most compelling and exhaustive research is being undertaken by faculty responsible for the teaching of African American art. Such faculty are to be numbered amongst the contributors to each of this book's four sections.

This book contains essays divided into four sections: *Historical Framings*, *Within the Academy*, *Curatorial Histories and Strategies*, and *Historical, Modern and Contemporary Considerations*. Three sections have ten essays, with the fourth section containing nine essays and some concluding considerations. In commissioning and grouping these texts, the intention is not only to assemble divergent African American art history-related narratives, considerations, and investigations into one volume, but also to trouble, unsettle, and question a number of the assumptions and presumptions on which African American art not infrequently rests. *Historical Framings* will look at multiple histories of African American art. Its first text, by Patricia Hills, is "History Must Restore What Slavery Took Away": Freeman H. M. Murray, *Double-Consciousness, and the Historiography of African American Art History*. Hills' text focuses on Freeman Henry Morris Murray, who was born in Ohio just before the Civil War and is credited by the late art historian Albert Boime as being one of the first to research, write, and lecture about African American representations in art, making him, so it would seem, the first African American art historian. Taking issue with what he regarded as disrespectful sculptural depictions of African Americans, Murray's legacy is his book, *Emancipation and the Freed in American Sculpture: A Study in the Interpretation*, first published in 1916. From Hills' essay we move to Mary Ann Calo's *The Significance of the Interwar Decades to Scholarship on African American Art*, Phoebe Wolfskill's *The Enduring Relevance of the Harlem Renaissance*, John Ott's *African American Art Beyond the Harlem Renaissance*, and several other texts by Melanie Anne Herzog, Anna Arabindan-Kesson, Tobias Wofford, Kirsten Pai Buick, Tanya Sheehan, and Margo Natalie Crawford. Herzog's text, *African American Artists and Mexico*, opens up considerations of the frequently unacknowledged or unconsidered spaces Mexico has in African American art history and Arabindan-Kesson's essay *Caribbean Absences in African American Art History* is one of several in the volume that draw the Caribbean into our considerations.

Within the Academy looks at the ways in which academia has in some respects been a generator of scholarship on African American art, with scholars such as John Tyson, writing on *The Washington Renaissance: Black Artists and Modern Institutions*, Tatiana Flores, *Disturbing Categories, Remapping Knowledge*, Sarah Lewis, *African American Abstraction*, Mary M. Thomas, *Within/Against: Circuits and Networks of African American Art in California*, Kymberly Pinder, *Black Grace: The Religious Impulse in African American Art*, Theresa Leininger-Miller, *New Negro Artists in Paris in the 1920s and 1930s*, Nizan Shaked, *Getting to a Baseline on Identity Politics: The Marxist Debate*, Rebecca Zorach, *African American Artists and the Community Mural Movement*, and Betty Crouther, *The South in African American Art*. Museum director Andrea Barnwell Brownlee contributes *The Atlanta University Center: A Nucleus of Visual Art*, an essay that, together with a number of others in this Companion, seeks to take a look at an important *regional* center of artists' activity. Too frequently, New York is taken as being the preeminent locale of African American art practices, emerging as such in the earlier decades of the twentieth century. But other cities have just as distinguished and significant histories, Atlanta being one such city.

We have perhaps seen the last of the large-scale survey exhibitions of African American art that were at one time a notable feature of the curatorial landscape. From the Harmon

Foundation exhibitions of the 1930s, through to an exhibition such as LACMA's 1976 *Two Centuries of Black American Art*, organized by the museum with guest curator David Driskell, through to more recent attempts, the *Black* exhibition became a familiar mechanism through which galleries and museums attempted to tackle neglected histories, fend off accusations of bias against, or indifference to, the work of African American artists, or sought to introduce African American practitioners into their programs. *Curatorial Histories and Strategies* looks at these histories, whilst also being mindful of what are perhaps updated versions of yesteryear's large-scale survey exhibitions of African American art – exhibitions such as 2014's *Witness: Art and Civil Rights in the Sixties* and the recent Tate Modern exhibition, *Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power*. Ostensibly, a number of these new incarnations are not strictly African American art exhibitions, as a number of white artists have been included – see for example, Thelma Golden's 1994 Whitney exhibition, *Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary American Art*. But it is beyond question that these exhibitions function in ways not dissimilar to their predecessors, in the efforts of institutions to introduce or maintain diversity.

With its texts, Lesley Shipley, *New York in/and African American Art History*, Blake Bradford, *Ain't No Stoppin' Us Now—African American Artists in Philadelphia since 1940*, Katherine Jentleson, *Surveying the Presence of Self-Taught African American Artists in American Museums*, Richard Hylton, *Status and Presence: African American Art in the International Arena*, Modupe Labode, *Black Public Art in the United States*, Nicholas Miller, *The History of the Group Exhibition from the Harmon Foundation to Black Male*, Elaine Y. Yau, *Black/Folk/Art: Shapeshifting Roles of “the Folk” in African American Art*, Julie McGee, *The Artist & the Archive: African American Art*, Nika Elder, *African American Art and the White Cube*, and Celeste-Marie Bernier, “Feeling for my People”: Visualizing Resistance, Radicalism, and Revolution, *Curatorial Histories and Strategies* will examine the ways in which African American art has evolved or been reflected in the art gallery and museum, in the United States and beyond, as well as within specific cities that lay claim to distinguished and important histories of African American art.

Earlier in this Introduction I made mention of the ways in which a certain elasticity has always been the hallmark of some of the artistic practices located under the banner of African American art. *Historical, Modern, and Contemporary Considerations* will discuss these impulses, which have been a feature of African American art throughout the twentieth and into the twenty-first centuries. *Postblackness* is very much the most recent of these manifestations of elasticity, and James Smalls' “Post-blackness and New Developments in African American Art and Art History” looks to situate this influential theoretical framework within the context of other recent developments. The section also seeks to give consideration to the history of practices of artists that challenge the presumed heteronormativity that has, until relatively recently, dominated grand monolithic narratives of African American art history. The section also examines historical aspects of the performative within African American artists' practices. With its texts by Uri McMillan, *Unruly Polyvocality: Networks of Black Performance Art*, Leslie Wilson, “Can You Get to That”: The Funk of “Conceptual-Type Art”, Rehema C. Barber, *Picturing Freedom: The Legacy of Representing Black Womanhood*, Allan Edmunds, *The Printed Image: Process and Influences in African American Art*, Derek Conrad Murray, *Queer Aesthetics in the History of African American Art*, Nigel Freeman, *African American Artists and the Art Market: A Dream Deferred*, Kemi Adeyemi, *Black Women Curators: A Brief Oral History of the Recent Past*, and Rebecca VanDiver, *Breaking Ground: Constructions of Identity in African American Art*, the aim of this section (reflected to varying degrees in the other sections) is to further open up understandings of what we mean when we speak of African American art.

Notes

- 1 The earliest publication by an African American art historian is likely to have been Freeman Henry Morris Murray's *Emancipation and the Freed in American Sculpture: A Study in the Interpretation*, self-published in 1916. Within two or three decades of the twentieth century, published material such as exhibition catalogues began to emerge and circulate, see for example, *Catalogue of an Exhibition of Paintings and Sculpture by American Negro Artists* at the National Gallery of Art, 1929; the Harmon Foundation catalogues, *Exhibit of Fine Arts Productions of American Negro Artists*, 1928; *Exhibition of Fine Arts by American Negro Artists*, 1929; *Exhibit of Fine Arts by American Negro Artists*, 1930; *Exhibition of the Work of Negro Artists*, 1931; *Exhibition of Productions by Negro Artists*, Harmon Foundation 1933 and *Negro Artists: An Illustrated Review of Their Achievements*, 1935. In a similar regard, we can also consider Alain Locke's "The American Negro as Artist", a text which includes reproductions of works by Richmond Barthé, Lillian Dorsey, Edwin Harleston, Malvin Gray Johnson, Sargent Johnson, William H. Johnson, Archibald J. Motley Jr., Laura Wheeler Waring, James Lesesne Wells, and Hale Woodruff, and is one of the seminal articles on African American art, preceding his books *Negro Art—Past and Present* (1936) and *The Negro in Art* (1940). "The American Negro as Artist" appeared in *American Magazine of Art*. Volume XXIII [23], Number 3 (September 1931: 210–220), a magazine published monthly by the American Federation of Arts, Washington, DC.
- 2 Louie Robinson, "Charles White: Portrayer of Black Dignity. Artist achieves fame with works on Negro themes," *Ebony* magazine, 22/9 (July 1967): 25–36.
- 3 Published around the same time as Powell's book, *St. James Guide to Black Artists* (St. James Press, in association with the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, 1997) was similarly international in its scope, though it was not the sort of comprehensive history that books mentioned thus far, attempted. *St. James Guide to Black Artists* was the first major reference book of its kind that sought to bring together, in a single volume, artists from major blocks of the African Diaspora, namely North America, the Caribbean, and Europe. (It also contained references to modern and contemporary African artists, some resident within the continent.)
- 4 29 January–25 April 2010.
- 5 Gallery guide, *Afro Modern: Journeys Through the Black Atlantic*, Tate Liverpool, January–25 April 2010.
- 6 7 June–4 September 2005.
- 7 From the *Preface* of the *Back to Black* catalogue by Iwona Blazwick (Whitechapel) Andrea Tarzia (Whitechapel), and Stephen Snoddy (The New Art Gallery, Walsall, a collaborating partner). Ampersands in original text.
- 8 11 November 2012–10 March 2013 "Fore presents twenty-nine emerging artists of African descent who live and work across the United States. Born between 1971 and 1987, the artists in *Fore* work in diverse media, often blending artistic practices in new and innovative ways. While some artists create large-scale oil paintings, others draw on top of photographs, or combine sculpture and two-dimensional work. More than half of the works in *Fore* have never been exhibited publicly; some are site-specific and react directly to the Harlem neighborhood and its social landscape.
Fore is the fourth in a series of emerging artist exhibitions presented by the Studio Museum, following *Freestyle* (2001), *Frequency* (2005–06), and *Flow* (2008). This exhibition traces the development of artistic ideas since *Flow*, taking into account social, political, and cultural conditions in the United States. Whether gathering and assembling everyday objects, referencing urban architecture and economies, or using film and video to mirror the transmission and reception of information through social media, the artists in *Fore* emphasize that contemporary art is deeply tied to its location, time, and historical context. This exhibition investigates questions at the core of the Studio Museum's mission, exploring art's relationship to U.S. and global communities." www.studiomuseum.org/exhibition/fore.
- 9 Were the decidedly *shorthand* aspects of the term African American, to be set to one side, we would perhaps see an immediate deepening, pluralizing, complicating, of these matters. Though those in the 2009 exhibit at Yale University's Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, *Living Portraits: Carl Van Vechten's Color Photographs of African Americans, 1939–1964* were not all African American, that was nonetheless the inaccurate title the organisers ran with. In this regard, "photographs of famed and accomplished persons of African descent who lived and worked across the United States" would have been an altogether more nuanced, and accurate, description.
- 10 Of particular note in this regard is Melanie Anne Herzog's *Elizabeth Catlett: An American Artist in Mexico* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2005)

- 11 The term was said to have been coined by Thelma Golden and Glenn Ligon, in the context of the *Freestyle* exhibition, briefly mentioned earlier in this text.
- 12 London: I.B. Taurus, 2016.
- 13 See, for example, Cherise Smith, *Enacting Others: Politics of Identity in Eleanor Antin, Nikki S. Lee, Adrian Piper, and Anna Deavere Smith* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

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SECTION I

Historical Framings



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1

“HISTORY MUST RESTORE WHAT SLAVERY TOOK AWAY”

Freeman H. M. Murray, Double- Consciousness, and the Historiography of African American Art History

Patricia Hills

Historical Corrections

“History must restore what slavery took away.” So wrote Arthur Schomburg (1874–1938), a writer and bibliophile, for the Harlem Issue of the March 1925 *Survey Graphic* and later published in Alain Locke’s *New Negro* (1925). Schomburg’s fuller statement reads as follows:

The American Negro must remake his past in order to make his future. ... For him, a group tradition must supply compensation for persecution, and pride of race the antidote for prejudice. History must restore what slavery took away, for it is the social damage of slavery that the present generations must repair and offset.¹

For Schomburg, written history had a mission—to include the participation of Africans and their descendants.

Schomburg, a founder of the Negro Society for Historical Research (1911) and active in the American Negro Academy, was one of the many public intellectuals focused on correcting the written record. He amassed a collection of scholarly books, literature, slave narratives, and art, which he transferred to the New York Public Library in 1926. Charles Seifert (1871–1949), another self-taught historian in Harlem, also focused on educating the community. He transformed his brownstone on West 137th Street into the Ethiopian School of Research History, housing his extensive collection of African sculpture and artifacts, books, manuscripts, and maps and making it available to schoolteachers and students.²

Indeed, assembling collections, mounting exhibitions, and giving lectures provided necessary occasions to teach the art history of African Americans. Paul Kaplan has written about several well-to-do Washington, DC, free black abolitionists during the Civil War era, such as Edward M. Thomas (1821–1863), who had an enviable library of books, collected art by black artists, and had hopes of organizing an “Anglo-African Exhibition of Industry and Art.” His friend,

the watercolorist William H. Dorsey (1837–1923), a scion of a successful Philadelphia caterer, also collected art. Such collecting by Thomas, Dorsey, Schomburg, and Seifert paved the way for the serious work of writing an art history that included African Americans as subjects and participants, and that was frankly partisan toward the project of seizing equality, equity, and full citizenship for the race.³

Three Washington, DC–based African American cultural figures—Freeman Henry Morris Murray (1859–1950), Alain Locke (1885–1954), and James A. Porter (1905–1970)—embraced the agenda of earlier public intellectuals and took the next step by writing books that would shape art history. They, too, had an agenda—a battle plan of strategies and tactics—to educate both African Americans and Euro-Americans about art, its origins, and the historic representation of black people. In the process they created the parameters that defined an African American art history and raised the intellectual discourse focused on the art history/black studies dyad.⁴

But Freeman Murray was the first to write a critical art history book, *Emancipation and the Freed in American Sculpture: A Study in Interpretation* (1916), and in the process he provided the first example of an art history focused on studies of racial representation. I would argue that his interpretations reveal a mind that exemplifies what W. E. B. Du Bois (1868–1963) called “double consciousness”—“this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others.”⁵ Murray’s idea-filled prose deserves close study not only for his insights into art but our insights into the psyche of an intellectual devoted to combatting racism in the early years of the twentieth century. But because of space constraints, this essay will assay only Murray’s contribution.

Introducing Freeman Murray

Freeman H. M. Murray was raised in Ohio and taught at a rural school for poor black children. In 1884 he passed a civil service examination, and moved with his young wife to Alexandria, Virginia, to work as a clerk for the War Department. With his school-age sons he established Murray Brothers Printing Company in the 1890s; as a businessman in later life he earned income from commercial real estate development. As a writer he contributed to many newspapers and journals, and founded a newspaper, the *Washington Tribune*. As a civil rights activist he joined with Du Bois and other progressive African American men to combat Booker T. Washington’s accommodationist ideology. They founded the Niagara Movement in 1905, the first civil rights organization (Figure 1.1) and Murray edited its journal, *The Horizon: A Journal of the Color Line*. He also believed in direct clandestine action; according to family lore and journals, Murray created a “safe house” in his own large Alexandria home, a secret even to his own children, where he gave temporary lodging to fugitives from Southern lynchings.⁶

In 1913 Murray began a series of illustrated lectures called “Black Folk in Art,” under the auspices of the Chautauqua program and summer school connected to the National Religious Training School in Durham, North Carolina. These lectures focused on the images of black people in Western art. One analyzed images of the *Adoration of the Magi*; another, American paintings representing black people by artists John Trumbull, Emanuel Leutze, Winslow Homer, William Sidney Mount, and Augustus Saint Gaudens.⁷

Murray’s motivations for publishing an art book—based on his lectures and newer material he assembled—can be teased from his correspondence and drafts of his book deposited in the Freeman H. M. Murray Papers at the Moorland–Spingarn Research Center of Howard University. In an early long draft, he noted that the American Academy of Political and Social Science had just issued a volume, *The Negro’s Progress in Fifty Years*, to mark the Jubilee Year of

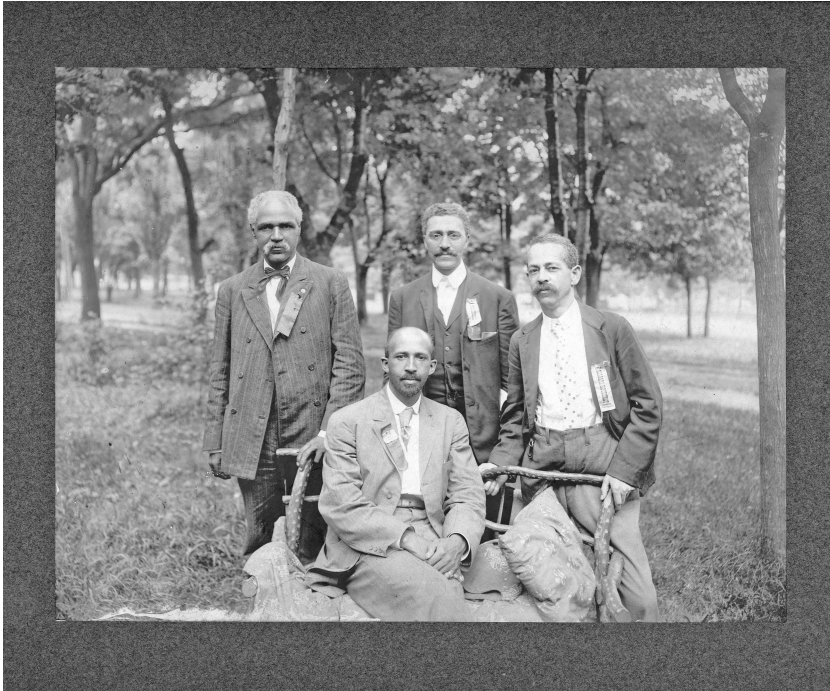


Figure 1.1 Niagara Movement members, Harper's Ferry, 1906. Group portrait of members of the second meeting of the Niagara Movement in 1906 held in Harper's Ferry, West Virginia. W. E. B. Du Bois is seated, standing behind him from left to right: J. R. Clifford, L. M. Hershaw, and F. H. M. Murray. W. E. B. Du Bois Papers (MS 312). Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries.

Lincoln's famous Emancipation Proclamation. He expressed his disappointment over the scant coverage of the visual arts in the volume's concluding essay "The Negro in Literature and Art," written by "the man generally regarded as the leading literary man of the race in America." No other than his colleague W. E. B. Du Bois (whose name Murray declined to mention) had written the five-page essay, devoting just two and a half sentences to black visual artists—which Murray found "pitifully inadequate." Murray continues:

The fact is that the lumping together of these two subjects, literature and art ... and the assignment of them to one person, indicated that the compilers of the annals did not expect that much could be said. ... [I]t was a golden opportunity lost.⁸

Murray knew a substantial study could do a better job, and he projected his ambitious undertaking would expand to several monographs. His first publication would focus on the representations of black people by American sculptors, including Hiram Powers, Daniel Chester French, Augustus Saint-Gaudens, and black artists Edmonia Lewis and Meta Warwick Fuller.

Central to this first book was the importance of *interpretation*, which he knew to be entirely subjective and political. He labored over this part of his essay, sending drafts to his friends: sculptor Meta Warwick Fuller and Dr. Horace Bumstead, the retired president of Atlanta University who, although a white man, had spent his life fighting for the rights and educational opportuni-

ties for African Americans. Writing to Bumstead on April 16, 1915, Murray worried about his interpretations:

I do not want to give offense, least of all to any present or prospective friend [i.e. a white friend] of my people, for we have none too many now.

That brings me to wonder whether or not I have used good taste in writing so frankly from the standpoint of a partisan—a colored man. But that is only one of many questions that might be raised, so I suppose it is useless to try to avail all criticism or dodge every difficulty. For myself I do not so much care, but I'd not like to even be accused of doing anything that would bring discredit or added difficulty to my people.⁹

Bumstead replied on May 15 with the suggestion that Murray's preliminary remarks be shortened.

In the final printed "Preface," Murray wrote:

It will be observed that the sub-title to this monograph reads: "A Study in Interpretation." ... It is my intention to stand with those who hold that the most important feature of art is *what* is portrayed; agreeing with [Henry] Tuckerman's dictum, "The first requisite [in art] is to have something worth saying." ... Hence, when we look at a work of art, especially when "we" [black people] look at one in which Black Folk appear—or do not appear when they should,—we should ask: What does it mean? What does it suggest? What impression is it likely to make on those who view it? What will be the effect on present-day problems, or its obvious and also of its insidious teachings? In short, we should endeavor to "interpret" it ... from our own peculiar viewpoint.

(p. xviii–xix)

Murray is adamant that black agency should prevail and assures his audience that he will include opinions other than his own but will minimize technical discussions. He then sums up: "At the present time and for the present purpose, interpretation—which includes: intention, meaning, effect—is of such paramount importance, that I would not wish to distract attention from it by extensive technical criticism ..." (p. xxi). Indeed, we know today that art historians face an ambitious undertaking when merging all three approaches to art: the artist's *intention*, the *meaning* to the artist's public, and the long term *effect*, that is, the cultural work done by art in shaping critical and public opinion.

Murray enlisted John Wesley Cromwell (1846–1927), the historian, teacher, journalist, lawyer, and civil rights activist, who had recently published *The Negro in American History* to write the "Introduction." Cromwell praised Murray for corresponding with artists and others who might "give the key to interpretation," and he has

no hesitation in declaring that the wide range of the investigations pursued, the patient and exhaustive researches, the expert knowledge, the critical judgment, and the marked literary ability displayed by the author, are so unusual as to entitle him to distinction.

(p. xxviii)

Indeed, in 1915 Cromwell recognized Murray's innovative art history—one that merged history, social context, and partisan art criticism.

Responses to Murray's Text by Our Contemporaries

Three of our contemporary scholars have analyzed Murray's text: Albert Boime directed attention to Murray in *The Art of Exclusion: Representing Blacks in the Nineteenth Century* (1990), wherein he devoted an entire chapter to presenting Murray's interpretations of American sculpture:

The text is indispensable to an understanding of how black people ... personally experienced the pictorial. ... I have quoted him extensively, not only because his authorial voice deserves a "hearing," but because he probingly dissects the central theoretical issues involved in the politics of visual experience—the relationship of part to whole, the opposition between appearance and reality, the dialectic of content and form, and the interaction between subject and object.¹⁰

To Boime, Murray was in advance of his time:

Clearly a foucauldian critical theorist *avant la lettre*; he states his intentions and biases at the outset, leaving no doubt as to his particular perspective. He promises an ideological critique bearing on the visual language of modern art and an attempt to break down the mechanics of this language through phenomenological analysis. He uses deconstructive methods for political ends, concerning himself not only with what is *present* but also with what is *absent* from the visual fields he chooses to study. He then proceeds to explain why his emphasis on what is omitted from a work is especially pertinent to sculpture, the most public of art forms.¹¹

Richard J. Powell, reviewing the 2005 reprint of Murray's book, called the author "a pioneering American art scholar—the first African American to hold this distinction—and a perceptive social commentator in the early twentieth century."¹² Like Boime, Powell recognized Murray's innovations; he was "even visionary in terms of articulating what decades later would be the theoretical exegeses and critical analyses of the probative function and social impact of art." Powell expands on the relevance of Murray for the social history of art:

Sculpture's capacity to communicate the social consciousness and political status of its black subjects—via the bodily positions, manual gestures, and physical manifestations of its represented figures—is at the core of Murray's critical reasoning and is the thematic drive behind *Emancipation and the Freed in American Sculpture*. Yet Murray also acknowledges art's interpretative malleability and contemplates what this open-endedness in import and sense might connote for figurative art.

Powell continues by praising Murray for taking on the white establishment's art writers, such as Henry T. Tuckerman, James Jackson Jarves, Lorado Taft, and Charles Caffin. Like Boime, he analyzes Murray's searing interpretations of Thomas Ball's *Emancipation Group*, with its god-like Lincoln seeming to bless the abject figure of the shackled kneeling slave; but Powell also takes Murray to task for his "contradictory views concerning gendered representations of blacks," namely his praising those sculptures of submissive women. Moreover, Powell faults Murray for not fully critiquing the "Faithful Slave Monuments" distributed across the South, although Powell concedes there might be some "passive/aggressive" irony to Murray's putative silence on the issue of "happy servants" loyal to Southern slaveholders.

Actually, we can imagine that Murray, the writer who does “not want to give offence” [see letter to Bumstead] must have been seething over the lies of the “faithful slave” imagery; and this is where archives can be so enriching. Tucked into a folder of the Murray Papers is a lone newspaper clipping, not identified but dated February 28, 1916, just when Murray was bringing his book to completion. The clipping excerpts Woodrow Wilson’s “A History of the American People,” which describes the fateful blockade by the North against General Lee’s troops and the increase of conscripted Southern white males, which left women to run the plantations. Murray (or someone else) boldly marked one three-inch Wilson passage in pen:

It was a singular and noteworthy thing, the while, how little the quiet labor of the negroes was disturbed by the troubles of the time and the absence of their masters.

No rumor of the emancipation proclamation seemed to reach the southern country-sides. . . . Great gangs of cheery negroes worked in the fields, planted and reaped and garnered and did their lonely mistresses’ bidding in all things without restlessness, with quiet industry, with show of faithful affection even.

No distemper touched them; no breath of violence or revolt stirred amongst them. There was, it seemed, no wrong they fretted under or wished to see righted.

The smiling fields not yet trodden by the feet of armies still produced their golden harvests of grain under the hands of the willing slaves, and the armies were fed.¹³

One rages today against this blatant falsehood—against a U.S. president’s willful and opportunistic perversions of the truth of history.

James Smalls, in his recent essay “Freeman Murray and the Art of Social Justice” (2017), builds on Boime’s and Powell’s observations. He expresses similar praise for Murray’s pioneering book:

In terms of methodology, Murray was, above all, a historian who rejected the divorcing of art from its socio-political context, as had been the case with many other art historians during the period who focused primarily on formal and technical analyses at the expense of historical contextualization and interpretation. Nevertheless, Murray did consider the formal aspects of sculpture as well and did not entirely dismiss the importance of aesthetic significance.

Smalls agrees with Powell’s phrase describing Murray’s “interpretative malleability” and his “open-endedness” in terms of meaning. Smalls finds Murray’s “somewhat conservative Victorian sensibilities” to be a shortcoming, and concludes that “Murray’s historical methods are flawed and he is not a model art historian in that he refuses to remain neutral, blatantly merging his personal gripes and moral baggage with empirical and historical facts.”¹⁴

Close Textual Analysis

I disagree with Smalls’s assessment that Murray is “not a model art historian.” In this postmodern era we have come to expect art historians to be not only scrupulous researchers who uncover relevant empirical and historical facts but also to have opinions and insights into the contextual surround of the art. Moreover, it is exactly Murray’s “personal gripes and moral baggage” that allow us, in turn, to gain insight into the black experience (at least into one man’s psyche) during the World War I era—a time when D. W. Griffith’s film *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) was being screened at Woodrow Wilson’s White House.

Murray possessed a seasoned knowledge of strategies and tactical skills for the antiracist struggle. He had been on the lecture circuit for two years testing his ideas on black audiences. His battle would be the issue of *representation*—not just what was *present* in art works but what was *absent*. What is absent might charitably be called an “innocent” overlooking; but what is elided, covered up, dismissed, or degraded is quite often conscious and insidious disparagement in the service of race and class hegemony. What is absent may also be motivated by opportunism, as artists and writers seek to please their audiences. On the other hand, *absence* may be “strategic silence”—when one stifles written criticism for the sake of a future, sharper attack.¹⁵

Again, the Murray Papers contain page drafts from one of his lectures that provide insights into Murray’s mind as he grapples with the power of representation. A full quotation is instructive:

It is not out and out caricature—bad as its effects may be and sometimes are—that needs to give us most concern. For, caricature, when it comes as such, frank and undisguised, is always subject to more or less discount. But it is the lethal poison—often only a suggestion; sometimes the mere breath of an insinuation—which lurks in art, particularly in what purports to be serious historic art. . . .

We black folk must be as keenly alive to what is left out of as to what is put into, the works of art as well as of literature which focus the eyes of the public. For it should be borne in mind, that a person can as surely be done to death by withholding from him salt as by administering to him arsenic.¹⁶

He then refers to one of his magazine articles where he was motivated by his “duty to raise a voice, of only a small voice, in protest.”¹⁷

Murray was in fighting mood in 1915 when assembling his book. But he was faced with the conundrum: how to interrogate living sculptors, especially since he needed their assistance for photographs to publish in his book. His correspondence with the sculptor Daniel Chester French and the published version of his remarks provide a good case study.

His friend Meta Warwick Fuller, a sculptor with whom he had been corresponding about his selections, wrote him on February 17, 1915, advising him on how to approach French, a sculptor recently awarded a major commission to produce an over-lifesize sculpture of Lincoln for the Lincoln Memorial:

I should write French . . . and inquire of him what you want to know—say only you want it for publication in an article covering MacMonnies, St. Gaudens [,] Bartlett and some others. I should not be too explicit—let him be that if he will. The point is to induce him to give as frank an interpretation as he will without your first telling him that the publication is chiefly for Negroes. I don’t obviously [?] mean that you should try to deceive him in any way. Do I make myself clear? . . .

Are you sure Frenches [sic] figure represents “Ethiopia” or just “Africa”[.] If the latter that may account for the change of features—he probably strove to suggest all the African types Egyptian etc. etc.¹⁸

Her caution implies that Murray should be charitable in judging the omissions of French’s work.

Murray, however, had already written to French, on February 15, when he sought to inquire about the sculptor’s figural group representing “Africa,” located at the New York Customs House (Figure 1.2). Murray wonders how to interpret the sleeping figure of Africa and the hooded



Figure 1.2 Daniel Chester French (b. 1850–d. 1931), “Africa” statue in front of the Alexander Hamilton US Customs House New York, New York. Buyenlarge via Getty Images.

figure next to the Sphinx. He quotes from the *New York Independent* (May 17, 1906), which noted the “mysterious figure suggesting the unknown possibilities of Africa” and from *The Craftsman* (April 1906), which opined: “This suggestion of age and ruin is further emphasized by a completely draped figure.”¹⁹ Flattered by Murray’s interest French immediately replied on February 17:

In regard to the hooded figure which sits behind the Sphinx, I hardly know what to tell you. Sculpture is the language that the sculptor speaks in and often the introduction of a motif is one of feeling rather than of any literary expression. I can only say in regard to this figure, that I had in mind the mystery that somehow we all associate with Africa and particularly with Egypt. In the *Century Magazine* for January 1906 an article by Mr. Charles deKay, in referring to this figure, says, “behind her crouches, deeply enveloped in a mantle, a figure that expresses the mystery of the deserts and the unexplored recesses of Africa’s primeval forests.”

The fact that several writers seem to have felt that this figure represented mystery seems to prove that I expressed the feeling that I had in mind. Ethiopia’s right arm rests on the Sphinx. I need not say that I should be very interested to see what you have to say about the group.²⁰

Murray replied on February 22, 1915, after reading DeKay’s article. Murray addresses DeKay’s endorsement that racial types for Africa and Asia need not conform to the viewer’s expectations.

Although Murray agrees that “the sculptor had a right ... to steer a course that suited him,” Murray adds, “I strongly suspect that his (DK) rather stiff defense of the “types” was because they suited DeKay.” Murray sees “arrogance” in DeKay’s remarks that French’s choice of types, “will suit those whose appreciation is worth while.” Murray then adds:

In my stuff I have criticized the “toning”(?) [*sic*] of “Africa.” To be frank with you, my objections are partly based on the supposition that this toning has for one of its reasons a tinge of arrogance—unconscious no doubt, like DeKay’s; for after all arrogance is merely grown-up and pampered pride. It may seem paradoxical for me to say that although the motive which prompts such “toning” is the highest—to make the figure look well, acceptable; yet is in just that fact, if it is a fact, that discloses and confirms the arrogance, or excessive, if unconscious, pride. “Africa” (and Africans) should look better if _____. Just as the Englishman, in the story, thought the Germans would be acceptable people if they would give up their “gibberism” and learn to speak English. [Murray’s underline is intentional—an invitation for “fill-in-the-blanks.”]

Murray disagrees with the *International Studio* critic as to the truth of an “African body type,” but nevertheless praises French for taking the “middle path between realism and idealism.”²¹

Again, French answers immediately. In his letter of February 24, 1915, one senses the sculptor’s puzzlement over Murray’s remarks. Although he addresses Murray as “Esq,” it is not known whether French knew he was writing to a black intellectual. (Note French’s pronoun “our.”) After the opening pleasantries, French states:

Since you seem to be particularly interested in this work of mine I am tempted to defend the type of the face of Africa.

It is usual to depict the negro with a snub nose and exaggerated fullness of lips and in fact the lowest type of negro that exists. As a matter of fact there is a type of negro which probably represents some section of Africa in which the nose is aquiline and the whole cast of features handsome and dignified according to our Caucasian ideas. I do not at all mean this type has not the fulness of form by which the African is distinguished, but that by the laws of composition the face is developed in a natural sequence that stands for beauty according to our European art standards. I would suggest that you look at the negroes whom you meet in such numbers in Washington with a view to discovering the type that I refer to. Of course I could retreat into the same ground that I am depicting an Egyptian and so even defend the long hair. As a matter of fact I think we artists are a little careless of our anthropology and take some licenses for artistic effect.

You refer to Mr. DeKay’s criticism of the figure not being African. Much the same is true of the figure that is true of the face and it is a fact that I have, in the figure, spoken the language of European art instead of sticking closely to the African type, which is at least as marked in the form as in the face.

French finishes the letter advising Murray that he “should somewhat prefer if you should not quote me verbatim. ... My chief objection ... is that I seem to be defending my own work and I have no wish to do so.”²²

There is much to digest in these excerpts from French’s letter. His remarks valorize European facial and bodily types that evolved in the history of art that we today understand as having a racist basis. To his credit Murray was challenging such “normative” standards of beauty, but he

also realized that such standards were hegemonic—meant to support the ideology of racial hierarchy. His parrying with French was a scrimmage in the war he was fighting.

Two-thirds of French's paragraph, from "It is usual to depict" to "our European standards," was published in the endnotes with the coy attribution to "a person who may be regarded as expressing the sculptor's view" (pp. 214–215). But Murray makes no comment about the covert racism embedded in French's phrase "the lowest type of Negro."

In the main text Murray gives a description of the group:

At the side of the sphinx and almost at "Ethiopia's" back, sits a hooded figure with a far-away look in her eyes; yet seemingly revolving ponderous thoughts in her mind. What is personified by this strong- but grave-faced figure sitting beside the sphinx, I do not know; but through all of her enveloping mystery, there is manifest a penetrating, uncanny power. ... Possibly French's idea here is ... "Humanity" brooding over the wrongs and indignities heaped upon "Africa."

(p. 93)

As to the main figure, which he calls Ethiopia, he notes that she "is scarcely noticeably African, that is, Negroid, in features; and moreover she has long, straight hair which hangs in a smooth plait down over her bosom." He continues: "With all deference, and without abating a jot of one's admiration for the group as a whole, one is moved to question such a representation of Africa" (pp. 94–95).

Admitting the many physiognomic types present on the continent of Africa, Murray adds: "But heavy-featured and crispy-haired people largely predominate on the continent; so it seems hardly justifiable to represent Africa by a long-haired, more or less sharp-featured personage such as we see here." Murray notes that William Wetmore Story's Libyan Sibyl was also "scarcely typical," hence,

It appears, that, broad-minded and catholic as these men [French and Story] undoubtedly were, there remained a residue of perhaps pardonable, and perhaps unconscious, race pride which prompted them to believe that their figures would be more acceptable thus; and possibly that "we" [black people] would feel complimented by this "toning."

(p. 95)

Murray concludes, "they have meant well and have wrought conscientiously and nobly, and we thank them for doing so. They easily could have demeaned or disrespected us, as lesser men would have done" (p. 96). Here Murray gives thanks that the racism was not more flagrant.²³ He then continues by quoting an anonymous writer for *The Craftsman* (April 1906) and Charles McKay of the *Century* (January 1906) and repeats remarks similar to those outlined in his letters to French.²⁴

Murray cannot let go of the major thread of his discourse, that is, the stated and unstated prejudice from many white people that demeans black people through representation. The last part of the essay on French ends on a meditation on racism in pictorial representation—written in an elevated prose combined with a thinly veiled ironic bitterness that his fellow intellectuals (writers, educators, publishers, and ministers) would understand:

There is no denying that as things appear to go among colored people in America, any artist has a fairly good right to suppose that "we" do put some premium on approximations to the physical features of Caucasians. Confessedly, the reasons behind this

apparent preference are somewhat beyond my ken. ... In the few cases where there is little or no doubt of its existence, it is generally traceable to triviality of character or to a supposed expediency; but we know that expediency is not based on preference. In any case, high and serious art should refuse it recognition; for it is neither worthy nor representative. It has no higher claim to recognition than have excessive prudery, religious bigotry, racial or class arrogance, or any other of the preferences, prejudices, and pretexts, born of shallowness, cant, and pretense.

(p. 100)

Here Murray admits that the Caucasian “ideal” seems to be a preference shared by black people, but one based on “expediency.”

Murray then switches to another insight, fueled by his and Du Bois’s “double-consciousness,” which Du Bois elaborated in 1903 as “always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others. ... One ever feels his twoness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body.” Murray’s “twoness” was the dialectic that counterpoises specificity of racial representation with the universalism of ideal values. Murray’s words:

At the same time, it should be bourne [*sic*] in mind that ... what is fundamentally needed in Art is not so much rigid literalness, as high purposed ... but sympathetic sincerity; not narrow exactness, but broad truth. ... It requires even a higher courage, and at least as much intelligence, to rise above expediency and insist on justice.²⁵

(pp. 100–101)

Justice, to Murray, was *not* to demean people whose bodies and physiognomies differed from the white man’s racial ideal, as French had done in his letter. Murray ends his discussion of French’s sculpture group by quoting Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s poem that begins: “Truth is fair; should we forego it?” (p. 101).

Not only does Murray invoke poets and scripture to support his views of justice and equality, but in essays published in the *American Antiquarian and Oriental Journal* in 1912 and 1913 he also marshals the latest research of scholars studying early civilized peoples: their physiognomies, religions, legends, languages, and migrations across Asia, Europe, and Africa and concludes that in the ancient world black Africans were respected and honored as “chosen ones.”²⁶ In his article “The Adoration of the Magi,” he praised European artists who represented a *black* African King among the Magi. He laments that no American writers gave such stature to black Africans. For example, Lew Wallace, the author of the popular novel *Ben Hur*,

surrenders to prejudice, and, while he has an “African” he makes him to come, not from Ethiopia or black Africa, but from Egypt, and is careful to describe him so as to clear him of any suspicion of belonging to that particular branch of the family of Ham which we call Negro.²⁷

Again, Murray suggests that opportunism leads white artists and writers to render a more “toned” African representation.

Murray was a man of his time (a Victorian gentleman), of his social condition (a black man struggling against racism), and of his cultural status (an educated public intellectual shaped by “double consciousness”). His history of art is both a critique of representations he feels are

demeaning and inadequate and a celebration of representations he judges to be truthful to the Black experience. His history is also the history of his contemporaries struggling to expose the truth of the lie of race.²⁸ They were living with the contradiction of double-consciousness. They valued ideal Truth, although resisting white prejudice that served as the self-designated gatekeeper of the Ideal; and they valued the specificity of Realism, recognized and celebrated by black people and the working classes. Murray clearly wants to take, as he said about French, the “middle path between realism and idealism” but on his own terms.

Notes

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- 1 Arthur A. Schomburg, “The Negro Digs Up His Past,” in *The New Negro: An Interpretation*, ed. Alain Locke (New York: Albert and Charles Boni, 1925), 231.
- 2 See Patricia Hills, *Painting Harlem Modern: The Art of Jacob Lawrence* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2009), 23.
- 3 See Paul Kaplan, *Contraband Guides: Race, Transatlantic Culture and the Arts in the Civil War Era*, forthcoming from Pennsylvania State University Press (early 2020).
- 4 See Freeman Henry Morris Murray, *Emancipation and the Freed in American Sculpture: A Study in Interpretation*, Introduction by John Wesley Cromwell [1916] (Reprint: Freeport, New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1972); Alain Locke, *Negro Art: Past and Present* (Washington, DC: Associates in Negro Folk Education, 1936); Alain Locke, *The Negro in Art: A Pictorial Record of the Negro Artist and of the Negro Theme in Art* [1940] (Reprint: Washington, DC: Hacker Art Books, 1968); and James A. Porter, *Modern Negro Art* [1943] (Reprint: Washington, DC: Howard University Press, 1992).
- 5 W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* 1903 (New York: Bantam, 1989), 3.
- 6 See Anina Hackley-Lambert, *F. H. M. Murray: First Biography of a Forgotten Pioneer for Civil Justice* (Fort Washington, MD: HLE Publishing, 2006); her text probes Murray’s journals, family letters, and interviews, and includes discussions of The Niagara Movement and Murray’s Underground Railroad station.
- 7 Brochures and flyers can be found in the Freeman H. M. Murray Papers, Moorland-Spangarn Research Center, Howard University, Washington, DC.
- 8 Murray Papers, Early Draft of the Preface, not dated, Box 2, Folder 19.
- 9 Murray Papers, Murray to Horace Bumstead, April 16 [?], 1915, Box 1, Folder 5.
- 10 Albert Boime, *The Art of Exclusion: Representing Blacks in the Nineteenth Century* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1990), 153.
- 11 Boime, 154.
- 12 Richard J. Powell, “Freeman Henry Morris Murray,” *Art Bulletin*, Vol XCV, No. 4 (December 2018), 646–649.
- 13 Murray Papers, Woodrow Wilson, “Throttled by the Blockade,” unidentified newspaper clipping, dated February 28, 1916.
- 14 James Smalls, “Freeman Murray and the Art of Social Justice,” in *Writing History from the Margins: African Americans and the Quest for Freedom*, eds. Claire Parfait, Hélène Le Dantec-Lowry, and Claire Bourhis-Mariotti (New York: Routledge, 2017), 131–142.
- 15 Powell, 647, uses the phrase “strategic silence” to characterize instances when Murray skips the opportunity to flag racist markers.
- 16 Murray Papers, Draft of a lecture, Box 1, Folder 5.
- 17 See F. H. M. Murray, “The Adoration of the Magi, with Special Reference to Mabuse’s Painting,” *A.M.E. Church Review*, Vol 29, No. 2 (October 1912), 89–99.
- 18 Murray Papers, Meta Warwick Fuller to Murray, February 17, 1915, pp. 9–10, Box 1, Folder 6.
- 19 Murray Papers, Murray to Daniel Chester French, February 15, 1915, Box 1, Folder 5.
- 20 Murray Papers, French to Murray, February 17, 1915, Box 1, Folder 5.
- 21 Murray Papers, Murray to French, February 22, 1915, Box 1, Folder 5.
- 22 Murray Papers, French to Murray, February 24, 1915, Box 1, Folder 5.

- 23 For a discussion regarding the depiction of “African features within a classicizing high-art tradition” see Melissa Dabakis, *A Sisterhood of Sculptors: American Artists in Nineteenth-Century Rome* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2014), p. 149 ff; Dabakis quotes Story’s comment on his sculpture, p. 153: “it is thoroughly African—Libyan African of course, not Congo.” [Note the “of course.”] Dabakis speculates that to Story and his colleagues, “Congo” facial types evoked images of American slaves not Africans.
- 24 In his long endnote, pp. 209–210, he disputes the notion of an “African” bodily type with large hands and feet, and elongated calves; he directs his ire at McKay and the *Independent’s* anonymous critic because they believe in such differences of bodily types. However, Meta Fuller also ascribed to such theories, as noted in her letter to Murray, op. cit.
- 25 Powell, 647, points out that for the features of a Harriet Tubman sculpture Murray “could not accept its raw, nonidealized realism.”
- 26 Murray, “The Black-Headed,” *American Antiquarian and Oriental Journal*, 35(1) (January–March 1913): 20–26; and “Buddha,” *American Antiquarian and Oriental Journal*, 34(3) (June–September 1912): 224–28.
- 27 Murray, “Adoration of the Magi,” 91.
- 28 Boime concludes, p. 179. “Murray provides us with a rare insight into what it means for an ethnic minority to live under a constant bombardment of images defining their social and political role in behalf of the dominant ideology.” Smalls, p. 141, in spite of his assessment, concludes: “Murray succeeded in demonstrating that a black perspective on matters of culture-making is not only relevant, but essential to the contemporary moment and near future of African Americans and to twenty-first-century histories—be they art histories or otherwise—that grapple with black diasporic representation.” My goal here is to provide detailed archival evidence for the assessments I basically share with Boime, Powell, and Smalls.

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2

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE INTERWAR DECADES TO SCHOLARSHIP ON AFRICAN AMERICAN ART

Mary Ann Calo

Introduction

In 1992, looking back at the career of James A. Porter, Edmund B. Gaither declared that essentially two problems dominated discussions of African American art in the early twentieth century: did a distinctively black art exist and what was its relationship to American art?¹ These comments were made in the context of observations about the respective influence of Porter and Alain Locke on the writing of African American art history. Locke urged artists to explore their own traditions and heritage, laying the groundwork for the possibility that a characteristically racial art might emerge. Alternately, Porter, unsympathetic to the idea of racial art, sought to account for the achievements of black artists in ways that embedded them solidly within the story of American art.²

In the expanded discursive field that today concerns itself with African American and African Diaspora art history, Gaither's observations may strike readers as naïve and even willfully nostalgic. But that would not undermine their accuracy. The issues Locke and Porter raised had a profound impact on subsequent historians who, as Gaither notes, returned to them in various ways across several generations. It is significant that both of these authors are—and were—recognized as pioneering voices during the interwar decades, when critical issues and themes were established that informed not only the reception of emerging work but also future scholarly inquiry. Study of the interwar decades provides important insight into how African American art history has been written and how it has changed.³

The Harlem Renaissance fostered the creation of a critical discourse in which ideas about black difference could be enlisted as categories of analysis. It was followed by a New Deal cultural philosophy regarding art in a democracy that carried definite promise for black artists. The Works Progress Administration (WPA) Federal Art Project in particular sought to employ the widest possible number of individuals in programs that were inclusive and nondiscriminatory by design if not implementation. It seems obvious today that the period between world wars, dominated as it was by the obsession with creating an authentic and democratic American art, provided a unique opportunity for African American artists to enter the cultural mainstream and for American critics to acknowledge their achievements. It is also obvious that the legacy of this

era was the opposite; the tendency to marginalize black artists persisted, as did the stubborn inability to dislodge the preeminence of race in the critical and historical evaluation of their works.

The Harlem Renaissance

Approaches to works of art associated with the New Negro movement continued to influence historical writing long after it had faded from view as a cultural phenomenon. The privileged status of the “primitive,” the African, the “folk,” and the authentic in Harlem Renaissance discourse has been well established in the literature. Their analytical power was rooted in widespread expectations that racial difference would manifest itself in art and viewers should be able to recognize it. Although these constructs were mediated somewhat by the cultural rhetoric of the New Deal, their impact persisted in part because they had never been seriously questioned by a majority culture with scant interest in African American culture overall.

The outsized role that art criticism has played in the writing of African American art history begins with Alain Locke, who was instrumental in drawing attention to African American art before and during the New Negro movement. Although he often spoke in historical terms, Locke was a cultural critic and professor of philosophy whose conceptual affinities were closely aligned with the intellectual traditions in which he was trained. He encouraged the perception of black cultural difference at a time when it seemed appropriate and even promising to do so. By urging African American artists to express themselves in characteristically racial terms, he sought to give difference a positive and modern connotation. And he was a strong voice for the importance of Africa as a touchstone for modern black artists. But Locke also praised New Deal cultural ideology and saw so-called racial art as part of a larger project involving national self-discovery and renewal. His major contribution was to theorize “Negro art” in a way that privileged the artists of his own time and raised their visibility.⁴

James A. Porter, on the other hand, wrote from the standpoint of an artist-educator who was also an academically trained art historian. Unlike Locke, who was primarily a critic seeking to position black artists in a matrix of abstractions about race, creativity, and expression, Porter set out to excavate, document, and explain several centuries of African American artistic achievement. His approach to art history was empirical, biographical, and sociological, with a focus on what was produced and the circumstances in which artists worked. In the classic essay “Four Problems in the History of Negro Art,” Porter laid out his position on the matters that so preoccupied Locke: “we cannot hope to understand in any clear sense the Negro artist’s relation to the main stream of American culture if we assess his production strictly on the basis of racial traits and race themes.”⁵

Both authors sought to connect African American art to the mainstream of American culture albeit in different ways. Locke wrote about the urgency of black artists seeking to define their individuality during a time when American culture was finding its own unique voice. Porter, on the other hand, remained focused on a history of African American art that was woven into the larger story of American art, not on the level of theory but of practical reality and circumstance. It is not surprising that Locke had a larger impact on writers of the interwar decades who were just discovering Negro art and looking for a way to discuss it. He provided the critical constructs and was plugged into the cultural infrastructure in ways that encouraged recognition of him as the authoritative voice. Porter’s project to create a fully integrated history was less compelling to a critical and historical establishment that still regarded African American art as a curiosity and was not yet prepared to acknowledge any form of affinity.

Porter’s approach, however, would become the dominant art historical paradigm for the next several generations of scholars. Mainstream writers with only a casual interest in African American art were not inclined to move beyond the race-based constructs that framed the

discussion early on. African Americanists seeking to present alternative narratives understandably have had to confront the fact that this tendency effectively isolated black artists from conventional notions of American Art and from other artists. As a result, in the tradition established by Porter in the mid-twentieth century, they have consistently sought to examine works by black artists in the context of both racial experience *and* the social and aesthetic ideals they shared with their respective generations.⁶

But the earlier interpretative paradigms proved difficult to dislodge, even in light of growing scholarship. In 1987 scholar Mary Schmidt Campbell noted, for example, that despite common interests, artists of the Harlem Renaissance generation were rarely compared with nonblack artists, and instead were typically measured against each other.⁷ Writing about these issues in the context of postmodernism, Charles Gaines suggested that African American art has remained fairly resistant to alternate narratives and models of historical analysis, resulting in a critical practice that “punishes the work of black artists by making it immune to history and by immunizing history against it.”⁸

The ascendancy of Porter’s “integrationist” paradigm can also be understood as a response to the most troubling legacy emergent from the climate of the interwar decades: racially determined art interpretations tend to marginalize the work of black artists in ways that mirrored legal and physical segregation. Porter recognized this as a danger of Locke’s emphasis on racial difference early on and it became the basis of his dismissive attitude toward his writings. More recently, Darby English has noted that race-centered discussions of art, what he calls black representational space, function as a kind of “tactical segregation.”⁹ English locates the utility of such practices in their power to sustain the purity of cultural spaces that would be undermined by reading the artistic production of nonwhite artists in ways that are not racially determined.

The late twentieth century saw ambitious efforts to redefine and reconceptualize the Harlem Renaissance itself, moving it away from simplistic critical formations toward a more expansive analytical frame. The 1987 exhibition, “Harlem Renaissance: Art of Black America,” raised important questions about the cultural context of the Harlem Renaissance, and the nature of art historical judgments that led to the subsequent invisibility of many black artists associated with it.¹⁰ A decade later, “Rhapsodies in Black: Art of the Harlem Renaissance” offered a consciously revisionist view of this era that challenged conventional categories of analysis. Film, photography, and graphic art were presented alongside canonical examples of painting and sculpture.¹¹ The show described a Harlem Renaissance that was both international and interracial, identifying parallel developments in Paris, London, and the Caribbean.¹² It also eased the chronological boundaries that had limited standard accounts of the era, eliminating the need to rationalize artistic production of the 1930s as a second renaissance when in many ways it extended the exploration of issues introduced during the previous decade.

The new emphasis on diasporic perspectives and transnational dimensions of the Harlem Renaissance has in turn deepened understanding of Western modernism itself as transatlantic and transracial. Sieglinde Lemke addressed the invisibility of black artists in traditional histories of modernist art, both European and American. What she referred to as black primitivist modernism, African American expression inflected with the ideals of both African sculpture and European modernism, rarely surfaces in mainstream accounts of early modern art, despite the fact that scholarship on the artists in question is becoming more readily available. Furthermore, Lemke made an important distinction between her thesis and the impetus to chart black “contributions” to modernism. She argued for not merely recognition of isolated or random affinities, but rather an understanding of modernism and American identity that renders it indivisible from black culture, such that “any critical account of modernism that ignores the impact of black culture fails to grasp the complexity of modernity.”¹³