



Wall Text and Extended Labels

AFRICAN AMERICAN ART

Harlem Renaissance, Civil Rights Era, and Beyond

AFRICAN AMERICAN ART: Harlem Renaissance, Civil Rights Era and Beyond presents one hundred works dating from the 1920s through the 1990s by forty-three black artists who participated in the multivalent dialogues about art, identity, and the rights of the individual that engaged American society throughout the twentieth century.

The subjects of the artists are diverse. James VanDerZee's small portrait photographs capture the elegance of black New Yorkers in the 1920s. Canvases by William H. Johnson and Benny Andrews affirm the dignity and resilience of Southern sharecroppers. Paintings by Jacob Lawrence and Norman Lewis acknowledge racial discrimination and the ongoing struggle for individual equality, and those by Alma Thomas explore the beauty of the natural world.

These artists worked at significant social and political moments in American life. The Harlem Renaissance, World War II, the Civil Rights movement, and the technical advances of the space age shaped their lives and world views. Family and personal history became subtexts for some; others translated the syncopations of jazz into visual form. In styles that range from documentary realism, to painterly expressionism, to abstractions of stained color, they acknowledge the heritage of Africa and explore the dynamic forces that govern the physical world. The words of Howard University philosophy professor Alain Locke, novelist James Baldwin, the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and their contemporaries provided insight and inspiration. In response these artists affirm community and individuality and the role of art as a vehicle for understanding the many facets of the American experience.

The Long Rows

1966

oil on canvas

Benny Andrews

born Madison, GA 1930—died New York City 2006

In 1965 Andrews began what he called his autobiographical series—memory paintings that dealt with the lives of people he knew during his childhood in Georgia. In *The Long Rows* he takes the idea of memory painting a step farther. Andrews gives us no clues about the identity of the subject. She faces away so we see only the bowed curve of her body. The low vantage point is from the perspective of a child who works the fields behind a parent, as did Andrews and his siblings. Silhouetted against the sky, the figure is heroic, an homage to the hard labor and perseverance of Southern sharecroppers. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of the Andrews Humphrey Family Foundation 2012.3.1

Portrait of Black Madonna

1987

oil and collage on canvas

Benny Andrews

born Madison, GA 1930—died New York City 2006

Portrait of Black Madonna seems to be a straightforward image of a woman. Her arms, the shawl around her shoulders, and the flowers are formed of pieces of painted cloth. The spout of the coffee pot is three-dimensional— Andrews worked a scrap of fabric around a piece of wood. Just above it, a zipper confirms that the fabric was cut from a discarded item of clothing. The collaged elements— which by the late 1980s were a hallmark of Andrews’s work—give dimension and tactile reality to the canvas. *Portrait of Black Madonna* is not only a picture of a woman and the joy and responsibility associated with motherhood; it also honors the strength and resiliency of women throughout the world. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of the Andrews Humphrey Family Foundation 2012.3.2

Blackberry Woman

modeled by 1930, cast 1932

bronze

Richmond Barthé

born Bay St. Louis, MS 1901—died Pasadena, CA 1989

The angular grace of *Blackberry Woman* speaks of stoicism and constancy. The subject—an African American woman in a simple dress who is balancing a basket on her head—is one Barthé may well have seen on market day as a boy growing up in Bay St. Louis, Mississippi. But she is more than an echo of an image once observed. She has the frontal, linear form found in West African sculpture, which Barthé first saw in Chicago, in an exhibition during The Negro in Art Week in November 1927, when he was a student at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase through the Luisita L. and Franz H. Denghausen Endowment 2001.6

In the Garden from the Prevalence of Ritual Suite

1974

screen print

Romare Bearden

born Charlotte, NC 1912—died New York, NY 1988

In 1974, Bearden created series of five screen prints he titled the Prevalence of Ritual that presented episodes from Greek mythology and stories from the Bible through a Southern lens. *In the Garden* is an obvious allusion to Eve and the Garden of Eden, but Bearden shows the Eve figure in the guise of a “conjur” woman or Southern healer. He said: She was called upon to prepare love potions...and to be consulted regarding vexing personal and family problems. Much of her knowledge had been passed on through generations from an African past, although a great deal was learned from American Indians. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Byron Lewis 2009.42.4

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John the Baptist from the Prevalence of Ritual Suite

1974

screen print

Romare Bearden

born Charlotte, NC 1912–died New York City 1988

For the *Prevalence of Ritual* prints, Bearden reconfigured age-old stories as allegories of modern life. In *John the Baptist* he drew on the biblical story of Salome, who had performed a dance for King Herod that so pleased him he offered to grant anything she might ask. At her mother's urging the young girl requested the head of John the Baptist, who had spoken out against her mother's union with the king. The masklike heads of the figures in *John the Baptist* blend West African and Egyptian visual traditions with a narrative about vengeance and naïveté. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Byron Lewis 2009.42.5

Shotgun, Third Ward #1

1966

tempera and oil on canvas

John Biggers

born Gastonia, NC 1924–died Houston, TX 2001

Shotgun, Third Ward #1 is an image of strength and resilience in the face of loss. Children play in a water-soaked street, oblivious to the tragedy of the burnedout church behind them. Adults look away, avoiding one another's eyes and the spectacle of the still-smoldering structure. A rash of church bombings in the early 1960s may have been the initial prompt for this painting. But rather than create an image of outrage, Biggers affirmed the sustaining values of faith, heritage, and community through symbolism: the wheel in the air at the upper right edge summons the biblical story of Ezekiel, while the grey-haired woman in red is an emblem of constancy and wisdom. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase made possible by Anacostia Museum, Smithsonian Institution 1987.56.1

John Henry

1979

oil on canvas

Frederick Brown

born Greensboro, GA 1945

John Henry tells a story of pathos and protest that lives in the folklore and ballads of America. Countless versions exist, but all of them speak of a slave freed at the end of the Civil War who worked for the C&O Railway and possessed near superhuman strength. Brown, who grew up in a blue-collar neighborhood near the steel mills in South Chicago, blends elements of the original John Henry legend with the lives of contemporary steelworkers concerned about layoffs when the American steel industry began outsourcing jobs abroad. Like the narrator in a Greek tragedy, he has linked the story with contemporary experience. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Gerald L. Pearson 1995.22.1

Resting

1944

oil on canvas

Claude Clark

born Rockingham, GA 1915–died Oakland, CA 2007

The title, *Resting*, coupled with the man's bare feet and everyday clothes, suggest that he is taking a momentary break from farm work. Although his eyes are hidden by a red hat, his face is attentive as he regards the unseen viewer. The palette of ochres, blues, reds, and greens and the loosely brushed shapes of his body and the landscape behind him are liberally laid down with a palette knife. Although Clark was born in Georgia, where his father worked as a tenant farmer, his family was part of the great migration of African Americans who moved from rural southern towns to the urban North in the 1920s. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of the Harmon Foundation 1967.57.32

Southern Gate

1942–43

oil on canvas

Eldzier Cortor

born Richmond, VA 1916

Painted in the early years of World War II, *Southern Gate* offers a surreal, dreamlike picture of a solemn young woman standing in a space defined by a once-elegant wrought-iron fence, a river, and the steeple of a distant church. They are evocative elements—the river is a traditional metaphor for passage, the fence an emblem of both confinement and of safe haven from the outside world. Wearing a necklace adorned with a cross and with a bird perched on her shoulder, she invites associations with the Virgin Mary; but Cortor's figure is as physical as she is innocent, an Edenic Eve who stands outside the sacred garden. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. David K. Anderson, Martha Jackson Memorial Collection 1980.137.19

School's Out

1936

oil on canvas

Allan Rohan Crite

born Plainfield, NJ 1910–died Boston, MA 2007

Crite thought of himself as an artist-reporter whose assignment was to capture the daily lives of ordinary people. His skill as an acute observer of American life is apparent in *School's Out*, which shows dozens of children leaving the annex of Everett elementary school in Boston's South End at a time when boys and girls were taught separately. Although Crite acknowledged that *School's Out* may reflect a romanticized view, it also presents a universal statement about community, stability, and the bonds of family life. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Transfer from The Museum of Modern Art 1971.447.18

Angola's Dreams Grasp Finger Tips

1973

acrylic on canvas

Emilio Cruz

born New York City 1938–died New York City 2004

Angola's Dreams was inspired by Cruz's sympathy for two Angolan men he met in Rome who had spent their lives trying to secure support for the country's struggle for freedom from Portugal. In Cruz's words, "these two bedraggled spirits were perhaps the most intense individuals I have ever met. Neither one could speak English so we communicated with Spanish mixed with Italian, perhaps at times assimilating Portuguese. . . . Our souls touched and I understood the life that blooms when people have dedicated their lives to what they believe to be a just cause." Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. David K. Anderson, Martha Jackson Memorial Collection 1980.137.20

Two Women, Manikin's Hand, New York

1950, printed 1982

gelatin silver print

Roy DeCarava

born New York City 1919–died New York City 2009

DeCarava once wrote that he wanted to photograph "not the famous and well known, but the unknown and unnamed, thus revealing the roots from which spring the greatness of all human beings." An intensely personal quality distinguishes DeCarava's photographs, yet his subjects are never removed from the environments they inhabit. DeCarava was born in Harlem in 1919. In 1952, he became the first African American photographer to win a Guggenheim Fellowship. Temporarily freed from financial concerns, DeCarava continued taking pictures of the people of Harlem "morning, noon, and night, at work, going to work, coming home from work, at play." Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase made possible by Henry L. Milmore 1992.15.2

Couple Dancing, New York

1956, printed 1982

gelatin silver print

Roy DeCarava

born New York City 1919–died New York City 2009

DeCarava photographed the greats of New York’s jazz scene throughout a career that spanned more than half a century. He often used light and shadow to create order and set a mood in these portraits. The black-and-white images are intimate and capture the sublime energy of America’s preeminent jazz musicians including Duke Ellington, Ella Fitzgerald, and Billie Holiday. In 1962, DeCarava compiled these photographs, along with his own poetry, into a handbound volume called “The Sound I Saw,” which was published in 2001. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase made possible by Henry L. Milmore 1992.15.6

Coltrane and Elvin, New York

1960, printed 1982

gelatin silver print

Roy DeCarava

born New York City 1919–died New York City 2009

DeCarava photographed the greats of New York’s jazz scene throughout a career that spanned over half a century. He often used light and shadow to create order and set a mood in these portraits. The black-and-white images are intimate and capture the sublime energy of America’s preeminent jazz musicians including John Coltrane, Elvin Jones, Duke Ellington, and Billie Holiday. In 1962, DeCarava compiled these photographs, along with his own poetry, into a hand-bound volume called “The Sound I Saw,” which was published in 2001. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase made possible by Henry L. Milmore 1992.15.5

Mississippi Freedom Marcher, Washington, DC

1963, printed 1982

gelatin silver print

Roy DeCarava

born New York City 1919–died New York City 2009

In the 1950s and 1960s, DeCarava traveled throughout the northeast and the south working as a freelance photographer, an experience that gave him the opportunity to observe the civil rights movement firsthand. DeCarava’s skill with portraiture is notable in *Mississippi Freedom Marcher*. The subtle gray tonality and close focus establish a sense of emotional intimacy between viewer and subject. Smithsonian American Art Museum; Museum purchase made possible by Henry L. Milmore 1992.15.1

Can Fire in the Park

1946

oil on canvas

Beauford Delaney

born Knoxville, TN 1901–died Paris, France 1979

Can Fire in the Park is as much a swirling vignette of thickly applied paint as it is an image of a place. Delaney developed a vocabulary of signs—streetlights, fire hydrants, manhole covers, and zigzagging fire escapes—that became emblematic riffs on city life. In *Can Fire*, the bright yellow orbs of streetlamps and the glow of the moon against a cloud-filled night sky embrace the men with waves of color and light. Delaney struggled financially for most of his life, so this empathetic scene may also represent a night he once spent on a park bench and the amity he shared with other homeless men. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase 1989.23

Penn Station at War Time

1943

oil on canvas

Joseph Delaney

born Knoxville, TN 1904—died Knoxville, TN 1991

For almost sixty years Delaney painted life in New York City with the discriminating eye of a caricaturist: “The real community is out there in the street where everyone is equal.” *Penn Station at War Time* is an amusing image of travelers struggling to make their way through a dense mass of people as they rush to catch their trains. Only a few stand out in the tangle of torsos and limbs. Despite its apparent spontaneity, *Penn Station at War Time* is a sophisticated painting. Delaney bisected the canvas horizontally to contrast the volumetric expanse of the architecture with the linear energy of the crowd below. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Joseph Delaney 1970.176

Top of the Line (Steel)

1992

mixed media: enamel, unbraided canvas

roping, and metal on plywood

Thornton Dial Sr.

born Emelle, AL 1928

Dial created *Top of the Line (Steel)* in response to the Los Angeles riots of 1992, after a jury acquitted four white policemen in the beating of an unarmed black motorist. The verdict ignited looting and rioting that lasted several days. *Top of the Line* re-creates the frenzy of the streets. Rope-outlined figures swirl in a dense field of color and line, grasping at pieces of automobiles and air-conditioners. Bold touches of red suggest violence; black-and-white figures symbolize racial tensions; red, white, and blue strokes, faint notes of patriotism, interweave the canvas in clusters. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift from the collection of Ron and June Shelp 1993.47

Tambo

1993

welded steel

Melvin Edwards

born Houston, TX 1937

Edwards created *Tambo* in 1993 to commemorate Oliver Tambo, the president of the African National Congress, who, with Nelson Mandela, transformed the ANC in the mid-1940s into an activist organization that called on South Africa’s black population to engage in nonviolent forms of civil disobedience against apartheid laws. *Tambo* is a sculpture of allusion and history, an assemblage of steel implements that speak to their original industrial origins, and to metaphorical possibilities. The I-beam fragments and wrenches allude to Tambo’s efforts to repair society; the shovel and spear symbolically honor the son of peasant farmers who devoted his life to securing equality for South Africa’s black residents. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase through the Luisita L. and Franz H. Denghausen Endowment and the Smithsonian Institution Collections Acquisition Program 1994.55

Untitled

1974

cast polyester resin

Frederick Eversley

born New York City 1941

Eversley speaks of energy, space, time, and matter—concepts familiar to physicists and mathematicians and to an electrical engineer who gave up a career in the space program to make sculpture. The disc form of this untitled work is the result of the centrifugal process. Its highly polished surface concentrates ambient light in a bright central orb that shines like a distant star in the emptiness of space and draws the viewer into a cosmic place. But the parabolic shape also acts like a lens that captures light and the reflections of

objects around it into a miniature black universe that dramatically alters relationships in the surrounding space. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase 1983.82

Resting on the Goalpost, Washington, D.C., June 1969* from the series *Southern Roads/City Pavements

1969, printed 1982

gelatin silver print

Roland L. Freeman

born Baltimore, MD 1936

Freeman has been on the streets since he was an eight-year-old who skipped school to ride the Baltimore trolleys. He worked with the arabbers, vendors who peddled ice, coal, and fresh produce from horse-drawn wagons, sold newspapers door-to-door, and joined a street gang. Concerned that back-alley life would lead to trouble, his mother sent him to live on a tobacco farm in southern Maryland. These experiences, and the people he met, shaped the work of a man who in 2007 was awarded a National Heritage Fellowship and the Bess Lomax Hawes Award for a lifetime of artistic excellence and contributions to the nation's traditional arts heritage. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of George H. Dalsheimer 1991.80.8

Bikers Take a Break, Sunday Afternoon in Druid Hill Park, Baltimore, Maryland, September 1973* from the series *Southern Roads/City Pavements

1973, printed 1982

gelatin silver print

Roland L. Freeman

born Baltimore, MD 1936

A back story is always featured in Freeman's photographs, providing an implicit chronicle that links the people in his pictures with a larger narrative. *Bikers Take a Break* is not only an image of hip young men showing off lean bodies, it is also a reminiscence of black Baltimoreans coming together on Sunday afternoons for the beating of the drums, an informal gathering that served as a reminder of a time in history when drumming was banned by slave owners because it kept alive the legacy of African culture. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of George H. Dalsheimer 1991.80.6

Horse-drawn Cultivator Mississippi, 1974* from the series *Southern Roads/City Pavements

1974, printed 1982

gelatin silver print

Roland L. Freeman

born Baltimore, MD 1936

Sometimes humorous, always warm, each photograph by Freeman represents more than the instant it captures. For example, emerging from the woods in search of basket maker Lee Willie Nabors, Freeman came upon a horse-drawn cultivator in a fallow field that Nabors farmed. Silhouetted against the sky, the implement becomes an emblem for the spirit of creativity that even the hard life of the rural farmer cannot stifle. Freeman's photographs tell of African American heritage and folklore and of people for whom the past continues to resonate. They are also the story of Freeman's life, the people he cares about, and the commitments he believes in. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of George H. Dalsheimer 1991.80.5

Paul "Hots" Watkins, Stable Manager for Many Years of Diteman's Stable, 1612 Aliceanna Street, East Baltimore, Maryland, December 1979* from the series *Southern Roads/City Pavements

1979, printed 1982

gelatin silver print

Roland L. Freeman

born Baltimore, MD 1936

The Baltimore horse-cart vendors known as "arabbers" hold a special place in Freeman's early development—so much that he dedicated an entire project to an exploration of their lives. *The Arabbers of Baltimore* is an intimate photographic portrayal of this

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hard-working and now virtually extinct group in Baltimore. A descendent of arabbers himself, Freeman's closeness to the subject was both difficult and rewarding—he wanted his documentation to reveal the arabbers' rich social history as well as their importance in the African American story. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of George H. Dalsheimer 1991.80.2

Our City

1998

acrylic on canvas

Herbert Gentry

born Pittsburgh, PA 1919—died Stockholm, Sweden 2003

Our City is a field of barely controlled skeins of color that swirl around a large central head. Above, a face resembling a traditional African mask summons thoughts of Gentry's ancestors. Below is a perched bird, a form that appears often in Gentry's art as a metaphor for the unconscious. Gentry said he painted "people I've met throughout the world—American, African American... who are my friends." *Our City* has the feel of both a memory painting and an ancestral tree. It evokes the people he knew and the ancestors whose lives and cultures are an inextricable part of his identity. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Bequest of the artist 2006.22.1

Light Fan

1966

acrylic on canvas

Sam Gilliam

born Tupelo, MS 1933

Light Fan has the feel of an image seen from space—a sunrise observed from an orbiting capsule through a window struck by a ray of light—or the blue and green depths of an ocean giving way to sunwarmed shallows. The effect is diaphanous; color has bled in irregular pools as the tidal pull of capillary action moved wet pigment around a field of color on a finely woven fabric. Edges freely shift in a way that is both accidental and controlled. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of the Woodward Foundation 1977.48.2

The Petition

1990

mixed media

Sam Gilliam

born Tupelo, MS 1933

Gilliam laid down the thick paint color over color and then raked the surface to reveal the multiple hues beneath. Edges are crisp and three-dimensional. Arches intersect and reach out, articulating positive form and empty space before spiraling back to draw the viewer into the work's industrial physicality. *The Petition* reflects a world created by man. Its materials—sheet metal, aluminum honeycomb, and industrial-weight paint—allowed no accidents in its construction. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of the James F. Dicke Family 2006.38a–g

Gina (Mexico)* from the series *Africa's Legacy in Mexico

1986, printed 1994

gelatin silver print

Tony Gleaton

born Detroit, MI 1948

Gleaton's photographs, and his mission to discover the range and nature of African diasporic life in the Americas, are inevitably entangled with issues of racial and cultural identity. But his portraits—*Gina (Mexico)* is one, *Peluquería* and *Padre y Hijo* are others—are often frontal and as formal as the images of models and socialites he photographed in the 1970s for *British Vogue*. Abstracting his

subjects from the reality of day-to-day life, he invests each child, mother, fisherman, or boy swimming in the Caribbean with a sense of dignity and individuality that transcends time and place. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase 1994.11.8

Familia Del Mar/Family of the Sea (Livingston, Guatemala) from the series Tengo Casi 500 Años: Africa's Legacy in Central America

1988, printed 1994

gelatin silver print

Tony Gleaton

born Detroit, MI 1948

In *Familia del Mar*, the gazes—of the father concentrating on straightening his nets, the mother who watches him work, and the baby facing the photographer—illuminate the emotional relationships within the life of the family. Rather than passively recording interactions he happens to encounter, Gleaton positions his subjects and structures his images to reveal psychological connections, and he adjusts the tonalities of pictures shot in natural light when he prints them in the darkroom. “What you see in a photograph,” he says, “is rarely what really is. We give it meaning.” Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase 1994.11.1

Peluquería/Barber Shop (Oaxaca, Mexico) from the series Africa's Legacy in Mexico

1990, printed 1994

gelatin silver print

Tony Gleaton

born Detroit, MI 1948

Traveling the dusty back roads of the Americas by bicycle, bus, or in a converted 1972 Army ambulance, Gleaton sought out communities that bear traces of Africa's legacy in the New World. In Mexico he made his home in isolated villages in Oaxaca and on the Costa Chica south of Acapulco and sought out a village called Nacimiento de los Negros (Birth of the Blacks); in Bolivia he lived with descendants of the African slave trade. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase 1994.11.2

Hija Negra/Flor Blanca/Black Girl/White Flower (Mango Creek, Belize) from the series Tengo Casi 500 Años: Africa's Legacy in Central America

1992, printed 1994

gelatin silver print

Tony Gleaton

born Detroit, MI 1948

Gleaton has traveled constantly—throughout Mexico, Central America, and to all but three of the countries in South America, photographing people of African ancestry and crafting an “alternative iconography of beauty, family, love, goodness.” He says he loves “the other,” which he defines as people who are separate from dominant cultural groups. “My work examines our common elements and the disparities, which in making us different, also bind us together in the human condition.” Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase 1994.11.5

Red Stripe with Green Background

1986

oil on linen

Felrath Hines

born Indianapolis, IN 1913—died Silver Spring, MD 1993

Red Stripe with Green Background plays with perception. A field of slightly variant shades of green is divided by red, yellow, and blue horizontal stripes. Above and below, white pyramids pierce the green plane, offering optical “windows” to a space beyond. The slightly off-center elements seem like playful dancing forms that speak to freedom and the joyousness of the human spirit. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Dorothy C. Fisher, wife of the artist 2011.25.1

Just Thinking

1984

gelatin silver print

Earlie Hudnall Jr.

born Hattiesburg, MS 1946

The close focus on the face of the woman in *Just Thinking* creates an unequivocal sense that the viewer is intruding on a private moment. According to Hudnall: The camera really does not matter; it is only a tool. What is important is the ability to transform an instance, a moment, into meaningful, expressive, and profound statements, some of which are personal, some of which have a symbolic and universal meaning. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of the artist 1994.64.1

Street Champion

1986

gelatin silver print

Earlie Hudnall Jr.

born Hattiesburg, MS 1946

Hudnall uses juxtaposition and subtle contrast to create meaning in his pictures. In *Street Champion* a boy brandishing boxing gloves, a girl holding a baseball bat, and their friends mug for the photographer against a backdrop of drying laundry and carpeting. The brick street and crumbling porch supports framed by modern multi-storied buildings signal that they live in an aging residential pocket within an urban environment. But their smiling faces reveal that they are oblivious to the impact of encroaching development on their carefree lives. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase 1994.23.5

The Guardian

1990

gelatin silver print

Earlie Hudnall Jr.

born Hattiesburg, MS 1946

Many of Hudnall's photographs focus on children and the elderly. "A unique commonality exists between young and old," he observes, "because there is always a continuity between the past and the future. It is this commonality which I strive to depict in my work." In *The Guardian*, for example, a father enfolds his young daughter as they stand along a street reflected in the mirrored lenses of his glasses. The American flag tucked behind his ear suggests more— that in addition to warmth and affection, he is passing on a sense of community and patriotic pride. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase 1994.23.4

Miss Bow from Laurel

1992

gelatin silver print

Earlie Hudnall Jr.

born Hattiesburg, MS 1946

Hudnall credits his father, an amateur photographer, and his grandmother, who kept a family album, with teaching him the importance of documenting people and the meaning of community. Hudnall grew up in Hattiesburg, Mississippi in an area where everyone considered their neighbors to be members of their extended families. Hudnall says his work is about "the simple things in life. How we live from day to day, what we do on special holidays, family kinds of things and so forth. And this has been my mainstay in photography." Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of the artist 1994.64.2

“The greatest obstacle to being heroic is the doubt whether one may not be going to prove one’s self a fool; the truest heroism, is to resist the doubt; and the profoundest wisdom, to know when it ought to be resisted, and when to be obeyed.”

—Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Blithedale Romance*, 1852 **From the series Great Ideas**

1975

chromed and welded steel

Richard Hunt

born Chicago, IL 1935

In 1975, Hunt was invited by the Container Corporation of America to create a sculpture for the Great Ideas project, a program that commissioned artists to interpret the writings of the world’s eminent thinkers. Hunt chose a passage from Nathaniel Hawthorne’s novel, *The Blithedale Romance* (1852), as his title and theme. Intending to evoke the feelings generated by the lines beginning, “The greatest obstacle to being heroic is the doubt whether one may not be going to prove one’s self a fool,” Hunt explained that the sculpture’s wheel and open, boxlike structure suggest motion in restraint. The arms that project into space imply man’s striving for heroic deeds. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Container Corporation of America 1984.124.122

Study for Richmond Cycle

1977

soldered, bolted, and burnished copper

with wood edging

Richard Hunt

born Chicago, IL 1935

Study for *Richmond Cycle* began life as a model for a huge plaza sculpture outside the Social Security Administration building in Richmond, California. *Richmond Cycle* is composed of two distinct parts that are separated spatially but united visually by virtue of shared material and surface finish. The large biomorphic mass that seems to emerge from the ground and then arc back calls to mind a living form, an enormous tree that has fallen to the earth or a primordial animal taking its last breath. Together the elements evoke the cycle of life in which age and the weight of experience are paired with the lightness and promise of youth. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Transfer from the General Services Administration, Art-in-Architecture Program 1977.47.14

Brothers

1934

oil on canvas

Malvin Gray Johnson

born Greensboro, NC 1896—died New York City 1934

Johnson painted *Brothers* in the rolling foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains outside Charlottesville, Virginia. The boys’ overalls and bare feet, and the angled picket fence that blocks recessive space, locate them in a small-town setting. During his career, Johnson moved easily between explorations of modernist composition and what was then known as “racial art”—art that paid homage to contemporary African American life and its ancestral roots. The children’s faces show no emotion; the only hint of their relationship comes through the placement of the younger boy, who leans against the protective shoulder of his stronger, older brother. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of the Harmon Foundation 1967.57.29

Self-Portrait

1934

oil on canvas

Malvin Gray Johnson

born Greensboro, NC 1896—died New York City 1934

The compressed space in *Self-Portrait* speaks to Johnson’s profound awareness of modernist compositional devices. The easel at the left side of the canvas identifies him as an artist, and the masks in the background make an assertive statement about his African American heritage. In 1934, the year he painted his self-portrait, Johnson joined the ranks of the Public Works of Art Project, the first of President Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal art programs, which paid artists a monthly stipend. Although the job lasted only six

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months, Johnson was finally able to paint full time. Ironically, the year proved to be Johnson's most prolific but also the last of his short life. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of the Harmon Foundation 1967.57.30

Mask

about 1930–35

copper on wood base

Sargent Johnson

born Boston, MA 1887–died San Francisco, CA 1967

Johnson learned to work copper sheet metal in the 1920s as an assistant in the studio of sculptor Beniamino Bufano, one of his instructors at the California School of the Fine Arts in San Francisco. The stylized oval of the face, generous lips, and wide nose reflect Johnson's aim to show the "pure American Negro." He said he wanted to depict the "natural beauty and dignity in that characteristic lip, that characteristic hair, bearing and manner." With *Mask*, Johnson situated the image of the black face within a dialogue about race taking place among the poets and intellectuals of the Harlem Renaissance: Alain Locke, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Langston Hughes. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of International Business Machines Corporation 1966.27.4

Early Morning Work

about 1940

oil on burlap

William H. Johnson

born Florence, SC 1901–died Central Islip, NY 1970

Early Morning Work presents a clear narrative: the day's chores must be done. But the scene is more than a reminiscence of farm life. It affirms the idea that Southern blacks maintained connections with the cultural heritage of Africa. Though seemingly primitive, the flattened forms and deliberately naïve perspective Johnson used were informed by years of artistic discipline. The man's profile is a beautifully rendered drawing of an African mask. Hands and mule hoofs are disproportionately large, while the horizontal stripes offer a visual cadence punctuated by the circular forms of a wheel and chickens pecking at the ground. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of the Harmon Foundation 1967.59.1082

Sowing

about 1940

oil on burlap

William H. Johnson

born Florence, SC 1901–died Central Islip, NY 1970

Sowing presents a simple narrative of farm life suggestive of Johnson's upbringing in South Carolina, but the brilliant palette disguises elements of tension. The plow the man grips is stained with red streaks. The woman's hand is tightly clenched as she holds the seed above the soil before releasing it. A ghost moon in the sky hints at things both visible and unseen. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of the Harmon Foundation 1967.59.1002

Self-Portrait

1940

casein on board

Lois Mailou Jones

born Boston, MA 1905–died Washington, DC 1998

Jones went to Africa for the first time in 1970, at age sixty-five, but the forms, rhythmic cadences, and vibrant color she associated with the ceremonies of Africa had infused her art since her student years. These influences are apparent in *Self-Portrait*, in which Jones links her identity with traditional African sculpture. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Bequest of the artist 2006.24.2

Moon Masque

1971

oil and collage on canvas

Lois Mailou Jones

born Boston, MA 1905–died Washington, DC 1998

At the center of *Moon Masque* is a papier-mâché replica of a heart-shaped white Kwele mask from Zaire surrounded by masklike profiles and designs drawn from Ethiopian textiles. Though stylized, the faces resemble actual individuals whose profiles are juxtaposed with tears falling from the eyes of the mask. It is tempting to speculate that the mask, representing heritage and tradition, weeps for the situation of contemporary African peoples. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Bequest of the artist 2006.24.5

Initiation, Liberia

1983

acrylic on canvas

Lois Mailou Jones

born Boston, MA 1905–died Washington, DC 1998

Jones was especially sensitive to the rights and roles of women. For many years she felt forced to ship rather than deliver her work in person so museums would not reject them because they had been done by a black female artist. In *Initiation, Liberia*, she interpreted the Sande society initiation ritual. The swath of white paint across the young woman's eyes indicates her role as an initiate. The mask partly obscures her distinctive personality but combined with the receding profiles at the left of her head, suggests continuity over generations that is implied by the ritual ceremony. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Bequest of the artist 2006.24.7

Bar and Grill

1941

gouache on paper

Jacob Lawrence

born Atlantic City, NJ 1917–died Seattle, WA 2000

In New Orleans, Lawrence experienced firsthand the daily reality of Jim Crow segregation, where legislation required that he ride in the back of city buses and live in a racially segregated neighborhood. His anger is apparent in *Bar and Grill*, which shows the interior of a café with a wall that divides the space into two distinct realms—one occupied by whites, the other by blacks. Lawrence says little about the individuals beyond their skin color and the way they are treated (customers on the left are cooled by a ceiling fan), but the skewed vantage point from behind the bar emphasizes the artificiality of the two separate worlds. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Bequest of Henry Ward Ranger through the National Academy of Design 2010.52

Community (study for mural, Jamaica, NY)

1986

gouache on paper

Jacob Lawrence

born Atlantic City, NJ 1917–died Seattle, WA 2000

Community celebrates the multivalent character of American life. In the 1980s, Lawrence was one of eight artists commissioned to create works on the theme of community for the Joseph P. Addabbo Federal Building in Jamaica, New York. It was an apt subject for Lawrence, who frequently acknowledged the value and encouragement of the black community. Walking the streets of Jamaica, Lawrence said: I was aware of the warmth, rapport, and the exciting movement and counter movements of its many inhabitants. The geometric and organic structures of the doors and various kinds of apparel and facial expressions give an overall special quality to a stimulating and unique environment. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Transfer from the General Services Administration, Art-in-Architecture Program 1990.36

Confrontation

about 1970

oil on canvas

Hughie Lee-Smith

born Eustis, FL 1915–died Albuquerque, NM 1999

With its half-demolished wall, odd configuration of poles, hula-hoop–like ring, and distant vista of calm water and low mountains, *Confrontation* presents an incongruous and unsettling image. But something is familiar about the scene; a quality of déjà vu provokes memories of difficult personal encounters. We assume a connection between the two young women, yet it is impossible to know the reason for their estrangement. Throughout his life, Lee-Smith explored the themes of the human condition and the wedges—social, individual, and racial—that thwart human interaction. But in *Confrontation*, Lee-Smith introduced a sense of possibility. The crumbling wall that separates the women from the landscape is not an insurmountable barrier; the serene world beyond is accessible by skirting boundaries. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Bequest of Henry Ward Ranger through the National Academy of Design 2009.27

Evening Rendezvous

1962

oil on linen

Norman Lewis

born New York, NY 1909–died New York, NY 1979

Lewis often asserted that art could not solve society's problems, but *Evening Rendezvous* is a deeply political painting. The abstract dabs of white emerging from a gray twilight are hooded Klansmen, gathered around a bonfire suggested by the hot reds at the center of the image. Angular white shapes in the foreground describe men closest to the headlights of their cars, while those at the top are obscured by blue smoke. The combination of red, white, and blue mocks the patriotism that the Klan claimed as its defense. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase 1994.32

Untitled (Woman on a Bench) from the project The Negro in Virginia

1930s

gelatin silver print

Robert McNeill

born Washington, DC 1917–died Washington, DC 2005

In 1938, twenty-year-old Robert McNeill was hired to take photographs for The Negro in Virginia, one of more than a dozen black-oriented history projects launched by the Federal Writer's Project in the late 1930s. With a three-and-a-half week deadline and a small amount of film, McNeil had to choose his shots carefully. It was a challenging assignment through which he sought to dispel myths about slavery and focus attention on the contemporary lives of black Virginians. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase 1993.72.8

Laborer (Stevodore Longshoreman, Norfolk, Virginia) from the project The Negro in Virginia

1938

gelatin silver print

Robert McNeill

born Washington, DC 1917–died Washington, DC 2005

Cropped to focus on a single dockworker, *Laborer (Stevodore Longshoreman, Norfolk, Virginia)* shows not the labor but the waiting, which sometimes lingered for days because the men were not permitted on the pier until called to work. It is an image of both dignity and resignation. "The look says, 'what the hell are you doing photographing me,'" remarked McNeill, "and I think it says a lot more." Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase 1993.72.10

Make a Wish (Bronx Slave Market, 170th Street, New York)

1938

gelatin silver print

Robert McNeill

born Washington, DC 1917–died Washington, DC 2005

In 1937, after enrolling at the New York Institute of Photography, McNeill did a series on black domestic workers for *Fortune* magazine. The sophisticated composition and nuanced handling of light and space in *Make a Wish (Bronx Slave Market, 170th Street, New York)* did not, however, mask the irony in the image of women waiting on a street corner hoping to pick up a day's work in front of a poster advertising a movie for those with leisure time. When *Fortune* rejected the pictures, *Flash!*, a magazine aimed at middleclass black readers, published them as a thirteen-photograph feature. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase 1993.72.1

Railroad Crossing Guard (Richmond, Virginia) from the project The Negro in Virginia

1938

gelatin silver print

Robert McNeill

born Washington, DC 1917–died Washington, DC 2005

McNeill was hired to take photographs for the publication *The Negro in Virginia*, one of more than a dozen undertakings on the subject of black life and history launched by the Federal Writers' Project in the late 1930s. Using text by African American authors, interviews with former slaves, statistical surveys, and photographs, the project sought to dispel myths about slavery and focus attention on the contemporary lives of black Virginians. McNeill understood that editors aimed for a noncontroversial book. "What they wanted were pictures of people at work, pictures that would show the soul of people in their jobs... even for people in menial occupations....I tried to be as positive as I could." Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase 1993.72.3

Zombie Jamboree

1988

oil on canvas

Keith Morrison

born Linstead, Jamaica 1942

For *Zombie Jamboree*, Morrison drew on a personal lexicon of myths and images. Both sacred and secular, it derives simultaneously from the memory of the death of a childhood friend and the artist's encounter with Christianity and vodun, the religion traditional to his native Jamaica. The large central figures are fantastical animals— a spotted hyena-like creature with bared teeth that sparks an impression of evil and greed confronts a protective horse, while a hissing snake, the Christian symbol of sin, hovers above. Dotted around this improbable cast of characters are Christian crosses, dancing skeletons, and two black figures, one wearing a mask the other with arms raised, suggesting African rituals. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase through the Catherine Walden Myer Fund and the Director's Discretionary Fund 1990.76

Great Aunts, Grandma Anna's Funeral, Birmingham, Alabama

1979

gelatin silver print

Marilyn Nance

born New York City 1953

Great Aunts, Grandma Anna's Funeral, Birmingham, Alabama may have triggered Nance's initial interest in spirituality. She knew that the people she met at her grandmother's funeral were family, but, she wrote, "I didn't know who they were or how I was related." Even so, their gathering to commemorate her grandmother's life, she felt, "was a testimony to our perseverance and continued struggle." The rich black tones of her great aunts' clothing as the women emerge from the dark interior personalize the scene and unite the women in their grief. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase made possible by the Luisita L. and Franz H. Denghausen Endowment and the Smithsonian Institution Collections Acquisition Program 1994.66.5

Smithsonian American Art Museum

Wall Text, *African American Art: Harlem Renaissance, Civil Rights Era, and Beyond*

4/23/12/my

The White Eagles/Black Indians of New Orleans

1980

gelatin silver print

Marilyn Nance

born New York City 1953

Nance's photography is about the spiritual realization that all African Americans are connected, in some way, to one another. In *White Eagles/Black Indians of New Orleans*, African Americans dress in costumes influenced by the ceremonial dress of Native Americans as part of the annual pre-Lenten celebration in New Orleans. One theory suggests that this custom began as a tribute by African Americans to Native Americans for helping runaway slaves; another suggests that it is a way of celebrating similarities between two minority cultural groups. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase made possible by the Luisita L. and Franz H. Denghausen Endowment and the Smithsonian Institution Collections Acquisition Program 1994.66.2

Oyotunji Village/Yemoja Priests

1981

gelatin silver print

Marilyn Nance

born New York City 1953

In 1981, Nance traveled to Beaufort County, South Carolina, to photograph the people of Oyotunji Village, a small community founded in 1970 that combined Black Nationalist ideology with aspects of Yoruba and Fon (Nigerian) culture. The traditional apparel worn by the Yemoja priests and the markings on the buildings give an otherworldly feel to the scene. But in the center, between the structures, Nance included a car that identifies the picture as a modern image. Nance shot and printed the photograph with the crisp tonality characteristic of the documentary style for which she is well known. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase made possible by the Luisita L. and Franz H. Denghausen Endowment and the Smithsonian Institution Collections Acquisition Program 1994.66.3

Community Baptism, Baba Ishangi Leads Exercise

1986

gelatin silver print

Marilyn Nance

born New York City 1953

Nance's photographs examine ways that people of color practice religions connected with their African heritage. In *Community Baptism, Baba Ishangi Leads Exercise*, Nance presents a nontraditional scene of a group of men, women, and children on a beach, mostly barefoot, who take part in a rite of renewal. The photographer's shadow at the lower right reveals that she, too, is part of the image. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of the artist 1994.49.1

Baptist Church, J. Patterson Singers, Shouting

1989

gelatin silver print

Marilyn Nance

born New York City 1953

Marilyn Nance is an award-winning photojournalist who has photographed the Black Indians of New Orleans, folk musicians in Appalachia, the first black church in America, and has served as staff photographer for the North American Zone of FESTAC '77, the African arts and cultural festival held in Lagos, Nigeria. Nance's photographs of spiritual culture have twice earned her nominations as a finalist for the W. Eugene Smith Award in Humanistic Photography, and she was the 1989 and 2000 recipient of the New York Foundation for the Arts fellowship in photography. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of the artist 1994.49.4

Harlem—Gang Warfare

1948, printed 1950s

gelatin silver print

Gordon Parks

born Fort Scott, KS 1912—died New York, NY 2006

In 1948, Parks approached *Life* magazine with a proposal to do a freelance story on Harlem's gangs. Editors, fascinated, offered Parks two hundred dollars to do the piece. "Harlem Gang Leader Red Jackson's Life Is One of Fear, Frustration and Violence" was a dramatic and poignant story told through unforgettable images and extended captions. Light barely touches the shadowy figures in *Harlem—Gang Warfare*, one of the photographs included in the essay. Shot from below, the picture captures the aggression but also the vulnerability of the young gang members. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase through the Horace W. Goldsmith Foundation 1998.121.3

Fort Scott, Kansas

1950

gelatin silver print

Gordon Parks

born Fort Scott, KS 1912—died New York City 2006

After the death of his mother, sixteen-year-old Parks's close-knit family split up and he went to live with a sister in St. Paul, Minnesota. The arrangement lasted only a month. Evicted by his brother-in-law, he took to the streets. Working as a waiter in a dining car for the Northern Pacific Railroad, Parks discovered the power of documentary photography---images of "men, women, and children caught in their confusion and poverty" taken by Roy Stryker's team of Farm Security Administration photographers---in magazines riders left behind, and he began taking pictures. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase through the Horace W. Goldsmith Foundation 1998.121.2

Ali Jumping Rope

1966

gelatin silver print

Gordon Parks

born Fort Scott, KS 1912—died New York City 2006

Parks completed some three hundred assignments for *Life* magazine over a twenty-year period. He shot fashion spreads in Paris and portraits of such luminaries as Alexander Calder, Aaron Copland, and Malcolm X. In 1966, in *Ali Jumping Rope*, Parks caught the heavyweight champion with his back to the camera and both feet off the ground. The photograph, printed in soft tones, confirms that its maker neither interrupted Ali's training regimen nor intruded on his personal space. In fact we see Ali's face only in the mirror. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase through the Horace W. Goldsmith Foundation 1998.121.4

Soldado Senegales

1935

oil on canvas

James A. Porter

born Baltimore, MD 1905—died Washington, DC 1970

Porter painted *Soldado Senegales*, a portrait of expatriate Senegalese dancer Feral Benga, in 1935 while in France on sabbatical leave from Howard University. Rather than picture the West African in one of his flamboyant dance moves, Porter posed him in the khaki uniform and fez of a French colonial soldier. It is a distinctly modernist painting and a subtle comment on European colonial occupation in Africa during the early years of the twentieth century. The striated red background and thin black lines that outline Benga's shoulders emphasize the shallowness of the pictorial space. The touches of green that highlight the sitter's forehead recall the canvases of Henri Matisse. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase made possible by Anacostia Museum, Smithsonian Institution 1987.56.2

Still Life with Peonies

1949

oil on canvas

James A. Porter

born Baltimore, MD 1905–died Washington, DC 1970

The softly brushed lines and gently calibrated color of *Still Life with Peonies* reflects Porter's thinking about the confluence of the personal and the contextual in the practice of art. The exuberant vase of flowers negotiates with (and against) the vertical rungs and curved handrail. The simple screen and striped wallpaper serve as counterpoints to the energy of the peonies' petals. Presented as the primary focus of the composition, Porter has depicted the flowers carried by his wife, Dorothy, when she was honored at Howard University in 1947, while the painting-within-a-painting represents a canvas Porter completed during a research trip to Cuba and Haiti. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase through the Luisita L. and Franz H. Denghausen Endowment and the Smithsonian Institution Collections Acquisition Program 1994.59

Thornbush Blues Totem

1990

painted steel

John Scott

born New Orleans, LA 1940–died Houston, TX 2007

Scott learned well the lessons of his blues and jazz sources. The brightly colored surfaces of *Thornbush Blues Totem* not only define the relationship among the cut and bent metal parts; the sequencing of color also echoes the way musicians modulate tempo and pace. Blue and orange establish structure; the varying distances between stripes and bands are intervals that quicken or slow the pulsing cadence. For him, interval, rhythm, and space are interdependent elements in a swirling dance of color and form. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase 1994.34

Celebration

1975

acrylic on canvas

Charles Searles

born Philadelphia, PA 1937–died New York City 2004

In 1974, Searles was invited to paint a mural for the William J. Green Jr. Federal Building in his hometown of Philadelphia. *Celebration*, a study for that mural, fuses the energy of an American street festival with memories of Searles's 1972 trip to Nigeria. The canvas is filled with syncopated color, the echoing forms of circular drumheads, and the waving arms of dancers. Searles suggests the duality of the human psyche by dividing the figures vertically into light and dark sections. At the bottom center, he included a child with a masklike face and spiky hair in homage to his young daughter, who died in 1971. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Transfer from the General Services Administration, Art-in-Architecture Program 1977.47.31

The Colonel's Cabinet

1991–94

mixed media with found and

handmade objects

Renée Stout

born Junction City, KS 1958

The Colonel's Cabinet is a narrative of exploration and memory that traces the life of one Colonel Frank. Like the gentleman travelers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries who created "cabinets of curiosities" filled with artifacts of distant people and places, the fictitious Colonel Frank collected small treasures to remind himself of where he had been and individuals he had met. An invented persona based on Stout's father, who, she said, brought the world to her shy and introspective mother, the colonel also reflects Stout's own search for a personal history. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase made possible by Ralph Cross Johnson 1994.45.1a–mmm

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Light Blue Nursery

1968

acrylic on canvas

Alma Thomas

born Columbus, GA 1891–died Washington, DC 1978

The chromatic impact of *Light Blue Nursery* is dramatic. Small blocks of irregularly configured primary colors dance across a bright white surface in horizontal rows that echo the ordered energy of a formal garden. Secondary and tertiary hues—pinks, purples, and greens—serve as borders and accents, reflecting Thomas’s conviction that she could play with perception and optical interaction in images drawn from her visual experience of the natural world. Although seemingly constructed of spontaneous strokes of the brush, the forms, like the colors, are thoughtfully calibrated. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of the artist 1970.324

Enchanted Rider

1961

oil on canvas

Bob Thompson

born Louisville, Kentucky 1937–died Rome, Italy 1966

In some of Thompson’s canvases, the artist revisited mythical and allegorical subjects; in others, Christ images, Madonnas, and Christian saints served as vehicles for exploring the battle between good and evil. *Enchanted Rider* depicts a figure astride a winged steed whose hoofs trample a devillike monster. The subject may be Pegasus, flying horse from Greek mythology who defeated the fearsome Chimera, but the faint cross at the center suggests a religious theme. According to legend, St. George held a cross to protect himself when he attacked a dragon that was terrorizing a village. When he slew the dragon and rescued a princess, the town’s citizens adopted Christianity in gratitude. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. David K. Anderson, Martha Jackson Memorial Collection 1975.21

Evening Attire

1922

gelatin silver print

James VanDerZee

born Lenox, MA 1886–died Washington, DC 1983

VanDerZee is best known for the studio portraits he made in Harlem after World War I. His sensitivity and the pride he felt from living and working within the community are clear in elegant and graceful images that challenged prevailing stereotypes. The sitter in *Evening Attire* is dressed in a beaded evening gown, an elegant, full hat, and a foptail wrap; she holds a spray of flowers. Her stance, coupled with the backdrop, the brocade table cover, and a decorative figurine, evokes formal Victorian home interiors seen in Edwardian portraiture and nineteenth-century *cartes de visite*, the small photographs people used as calling cards in the late nineteenth century. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase through the Julia D. Strong Endowment and the Smithsonian Institution Collections Acquisition Program 1994.57.3

Field Workers

about 1948–51

oil on fiberboard

Ellis Wilson

born Mayfield, KY 1899–died New York City 1977

A lush jungle of flowering tobacco plants provides the backdrop for a family of field hands who walk in frieze-like procession along a rough dirt path. The hoes and head coverings convey the nature of their toil in the heat of a late summer sun, yet their upright postures and steady gait suggest liveliness. Faces are hidden in shadow and bodies are defined by unmodulated shapes of the brightly colored clothing. *Field Workers* speaks eloquently to the condition of a particular family’s life—and by extension to the lives of all who toil on the land. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of the Harmon Foundation 1967.57.31

Afro Emblems

1950

oil on linen

Hale Woodruff

born Cairo, IL 1900—died New York City 1980

In Woodruff's *Afro Emblems*, objects hovering in a field of blue speak of ancient times and people. Their forms—some calligraphic, others geometric—are loosely arranged into vertical columns, stacked as though on totem poles that record the history and oral traditions of a culture. Influenced by cave paintings, Egyptian tomb reliefs, pre-Columbian pottery, Melanesian totems, and African art, Woodruff makes a statement about the resonance of values, traditions, and spiritual beliefs among people from around the world and across time. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Alfred T. Morris Jr. 1984.149.2

Untitled

1973

acrylic on canvas

Kenneth Victor Young

born Louisville, Kentucky 1933

The black orbs in Kenneth Young's untitled abstraction are deceptive. They seem alternately microscopic, like organisms floating in a fluid field, or cosmic, like bits of matter captured in a split second. Opaque at the center, the spheres are fluid at their edges. The space, too, is ambiguous. Deep reds seem distant; electric blues propel dark forms forward from unfathomable depths. Energy and matter were apt subjects for Young, a young physicist who turned to painting: "I've always been interested in . . . outer space, inner space, and the development of what occurs—force, magnetism, and that kind of thing." Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Mr. Val E. Lewton 1987.46