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Visual and Sensory Experience Essay – African American Art

Art for African American Art's Sake

The Acceptance of Abstract African American Art

Since the Harlem Renaissance, scholars and members of the arts community have debated about how African American artists and their work should be included within the canon of “American Art”. Influential figures in the black arts community such as Alain Locke and W.E.B. DuBois argued that black artists should strive to represent the African American experience through their visual works. This mentality alludes to the idea that simply creating art for art's sake has traditionally been a luxury that was only reserved for the white establishment. In order to derive a political or social commentary about the African American experience from the visual culture produced by black artists, it has been much more conducive for art critics and curators to interpret works that include figural representations or depictions of African Americans. During the 20th century, museums and art critics in the United States more often chose to exhibit and propagate those African American artists who created representational images depicting African American life. As a result, black artists in America who worked in abstraction during this era received less exposure and are now under-represented in museum collections. Artists such as Romare Bearden and Jacob Lawrence, who both portrayed African American people in their paintings, have traditionally been well collected by major art institutions. Meanwhile, these same art museums, as a whole, have been less apt to pursue works from more abstract African American artists, such as Norman Lewis, or Richard Hunt. Today we are seeing a growth in the practice of American art museums attempting to correct this gap in their collections.

Norman Lewis began his painting career in the midst of the Harlem renaissance during the 1930s. The writings of African American literary scholars such as Alain Locke influenced much of the artwork that was produced from this movement. In his 1925 essay *Enter The New Negro*, Locke proposed and argued for the establishment of an African American visual culture all of its own.¹ African American arts and culture publications such as *Survey Graphic* and *Crisis*, that were influential to many Harlem Renaissance artists, published works by black artists that often depicted the struggles of black citizens in America. As a result of their needing to directly tackle visceral issues of persecution such as lynching in the United States, artworks published in these magazines more often depicted these real crises, as opposed to engaging in abstraction or more aesthetic artistic pursuits.

Norman Lewis is an example of an African American artist from this era who prioritized the later aesthetic nature of his artwork over subject matter. Born and raised in Harlem, Lewis started out like many of his contemporary African American artists, painting scenes that he observed in his daily life. *Girl with Yellow Hat* (1936) and *Two Women Reading* (1940) are some examples of his earlier work that dealt with the figure. By the late 1940s, however Lewis' style was moving progressively into abstract expressionist painting, and this would remain his chosen medium for the artwork he produced in his career. Lewis was an adamant supporter of the civil rights movement, he even participated in an African American artists activist group known as *Spiral*.² Nevertheless, as a result of his stylistic choices, Norman Lewis found himself without the African American arts community, who were in the midst of developing a visual culture that represented their experience in more figural works. Due to the color of his skin however, during his career Lewis was also excluded from the successes of the avant-garde artist group to which

¹ Alain Locke, "Enter the New Negro." *Survey Graphic*, March 1925.

² Sharon F. Patton, *African-American Art*. Oxford History of Art. Oxford University Press, 1998. Pg. 185

he most certainly belongs: the abstract expressionist movement of the 1940s and 50s. Lewis strove to grow his artwork aesthetically, and in this personal journey as an artist, abandoned subject matter for abstraction. As a result of this difference in the aesthetic nature of his work, Lewis experienced a difference in the level of institutional and commercial success that he experienced as an artist during his lifetime.

In contrast to the story of Norman Lewis's career, there are multiple examples of African American Artists from the second half of the 20th century that did experience relatively greater levels of institutional representation and acceptance in various art communities. Major art museums in the United States have collected paintings by Jacob Lawrence and Romare Bearden since the 1940s.³ Both of these artists include figural representations of African Americans in the vast majority of their painting compositions. Bearden works in messy collage, and Lawrence's style is more minimalistic, making use of larger flat sections of color. However, both of these artists work in a visual style that is representational enough that we as viewers are able to immediately identify the subject matter. Museum curators and cultural publications that wanted to include paintings that represented the African American experience could easily go to works such as these, that portrayed black people, and were executed by black artists in America. The *Crisis* magazine, which was run by W.E.B. DuBois featured works by both of these artists.⁴ The lasting success of these two particular artists in part resulted from their inclusion of representational subject matter that could be more easily interpreted by museums and supported the aesthetic and political objectives of the African American art movement.

³ "The Collection | MoMA." The Museum of Modern Art. <https://www.moma.org/collection/>.

⁴ Amy Helene Kirschke. *Art in Crisis: W.E.B. Du Bois and the Struggle for African American Identity and Memory*. Bloomington, (Ind.): Indiana University Press, 2007.

The differences in interpretation for figural and abstract artworks by African American artists was put on full display at the Museum of Modern art in 1971. From March 25th until July 9th of that year, the museum held two parallel exhibits of active African American artists. *The Sculpture of Richard Hunt* exhibited the abstract work of this relatively young artist, while *Romare Bearden: The Prevalence of Ritual* was a retrospective exhibit for the slightly more established, figural painter. Immediately we see a difference in how these artists are being portrayed by the museum, simply from the differences in the titles of their respective exhibits. Although his abstract artwork is certainly expressive, Richard Hunt receives a straight-forward and terse title that tells the audience exactly what they are going to see: that is, Richard Hunt's sculptures. In contrast, the title for the exhibit of Romare Bearden's work immediately attaches more weight and meaning to his paintings; the phrase "the prevalence of ritual" focuses the viewer on a potential theme or lesson that should be gained from viewing Bearden's work. This difference in treatment that is contained within the titles of the exhibits is reflected in the accompanying exhibition catalogues produced by MoMA as well as the subsequent media coverage of the event.

Within the first paragraph of her introductory essay to the exhibit of Romare Bearden's painting, Carroll Greene draws direct connections between the aesthetic of Bearden's artwork and the racial aspect of his experience as an African American. She identifies an overarching theme of Bearden's paintings, stating that they are "-the aesthetic expression of the life and life style of a people in visual and plastic language. (...); it is nurtured by his knowledge of and experience in black America."⁵ Her essay concludes with the statement that "The Prevalence of Ritual, then is more than an exhibition; it is an affirmation, a celebration, a victory of the human

⁵ Museum of Modern Art, and Carroll Greene. *Romare Bearden: The Prevalence of Ritual*. The Museum of Modern Art. www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/2671.

spirit over all the forces that would oppress it.”⁶ In this exhibit, it seems that the importance of Bearden’s artwork is due to his social and political context as an African American. The exhibit’s title and accompanying literature continue to interpret this kind of meaning from his figural aesthetic choices in collage. In contrast, the introduction essay that was written by William Lieberman for Richard Hunt’s exhibit at the MoMA, discusses the abstract sculptor’s craft, but makes no mention of, or draws any connections between his art and his status as an African American.⁷

The New York Times coverage of the event identified this discrepancy, and perpetuated the same narrative, pointing out that “Mr. Hunt’s totally abstract welded steel sculpture bears no visible reference to the “black experience,” while Mr. Bearden’s poignant montage-paintings of Negroes going about their daily lives attempts to deal with it directly.”⁸ The remainder of this same review in the New York Times then dropped the subject of Hunt’s exhibit entirely and went on to describe the achievements and works of Bearden in detail. Both the media coverage of, and interpretative materials produced for these exhibits, trend toward establishing greater meaning and importance in the works of the figural art representing the experience of African Americans, as opposed to the abstract sculpture. In this particular case, we can also see that the collecting practices of the Museum of Modern Art affirm this. While the Museum maintains no less than four paintings that were included in the 1971 Romare Bearden exhibit in its permanent collection, it only has one such statue from Richard Hunt’s exhibit that was put on at the same time.⁹

⁶ Museum of Modern Art, and Carroll Greene.

⁷ Museum of Modern Art, and William S. Lieberman. *The Sculpture of Richard Hunt*. The Museum of Modern Art. www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/2670.

⁸ Glueck, Grace. "Works of Bearden and Hunt are Displayed." *New York Times* (1923-Current File), Mar 24, 1971.

⁹ "The Collection | MoMA." The Museum of Modern Art. <https://www.moma.org/collection/>.

As a whole, art museum collections in the United States have established a canon of figural artworks by black artists to represent the African American experience. The embellishment and affirmation of the importance of representational works by artists such as Romare Bearden and Jacob Lawrence came as a result of both the African American arts community's desire and need to politicize their artworks, as well as the increased ease with which museum curators could interpret these works to tell a story about the African American perspective. In contrast to the institutional importance that has been placed upon works of this figural nature, black artists of the 20th century whose aesthetic preference was to create abstract works of art, have struggled to receive the same recognition. As scholars and art historians continue to review the canon of art in America, the importance of the abstract works from black artists in the 20th century will continue to receive greater recognition, further interpretation, and increasing representation in museum collections.

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