

## EXHIBITION REVIEW

“Two Major Collections of African American Art”

©Susan Platt first published in *Art Access* September 2001

An exciting conjunction of two major collections of African American art is taking place in Seattle at the Bank of America Gallery until October 26 and at the Tacoma Art Museum until November 25. Together these exhibitions provide an unusual opportunity for an in depth look at the history of African American art as well as new perspectives on contemporary art.

The *Walter O. Evans Collection of African American Art* in Tacoma includes 80 works by artists from the mid nineteenth century to the present. This collection features old masters like Henry Ossawa Tanner, the visionary student of Thomas Eakins who spent most of his career in Paris, and Edward Bannister, the landscape painter based in Providence, Rhode Island. Mary Edmonia Lewis the neoclassical sculptor, who was both Native American and African American and lived in Rome for many years, is represented by two major marble sculptures on the subject of Hiawatha. My favorite of the early twentieth century Harlem Renaissance artists is Aaron Douglas represented here by the stunning black and white drawing “The Negro Speaks of Two Rivers (for Langston Hughes),” 1941, as well as four paintings from the 1920s and 1930s. Elizabeth Catlett has a brooding bronze figure “Pensive”, and an exuberant mahogany “Homage to Women Poets,” 1984.

Dr. Walter Evans began his collection with the John Brown print portfolio by Jacob Lawrence in 1977/8. Although that group is not in the present exhibition, a moving and subtle group of Lawrence paintings includes “Wounded Man,” 1968 and several of the gouaches of the “Genesis Creation Sermon Series” from 1989. (All eight screen prints from this dramatic series were shown at the Jacob Lawrence Gallery, University of Washington this summer in their brief summer show “Jacob Lawrence Selected Prints 1971 – 2000,” July 5-31). The eight Romare Beardon paintings in the Evans Collection span forty years and provide a mini survey of his complicated combination of layered imagery and technical virtuosity.

But there are also surprises from artists who are not yet household names. The vital legacy of the government art support in the 1930s is obvious in works like Marion Perkins “Figure Sitting,” 1939, a compressed seated woman in stone. Charles White’s realistic drawings of Frederick Douglas and Sojourner Truth from 1940 are related to an important mural in the Howard University Gallery of Art collection. Other artists represented who received important commissions and teaching opportunities with the government art programs are Margaret Burroughs, Eldzier Cortor, and Charles Alston, Sargent Claude Johnson. They are represented here by works from later in their careers like Alston’s abstract “Seated Figure”(1970) and Cortor’s eerie and dismembered imagery in his ink drawing “Composition with Three Women,” 1950.

Among the later twentieth century artists, the paintings by Alma Thomas and Norman Lewis, as well as the sculptures by Richard Hunt, all give new insights into these major

abstract artists. Hunt's bronze "Model for the Middle Passage Monument" (1987) combines the image of a split open slave ship with a dynamic handling of abstract forms and space.

*Celebration and Vision: The Hewitt Collection of African American Art* at the Bank of America Gallery in Seattle has a few of the same celebrity artists, such as Tanner, Alston, Catlett, Bearden and Lawrence, as well as an outstanding group of works by Hale Woodruff who was a personal friend of the collectors, but Vivian Hewitt emphasized that she and her husband, John, sought out emerging artists. They first decided to buy visual art, she told me, while they were on their honeymoon, when they bought prints by the Mexican muralists Jose Clemente Orozco, Diego Rivera and David Alfaro Siqueiros instead of plates and jewelry. Many of the artists they collect are personal friends such as Ernst Crichlow who is well represented with ten works from 1948 – 1982 in paintings, serigraphs, lithographs and collage. Another artist in the Hewitt collection who is not represented in the Tacoma exhibition is the Texas-based muralist John Biggers. His drawings use subtle cross hatching techniques and elongated figures that create a brooding, mysterious atmosphere.

But many of these artists like James Denmark, Jonathan Green, J. Eugene Grigsby, Earl Hill, Virginia Evans Smith, and Ann Tinsley emerged in the 1970s and 1980s. They practice a variety of painting styles from realistic to abstract. J. Eugene Grigsby's 1963 "Abstraction in Red and Black," evokes a sky like composition with highly saturated reds, yellows and blues, but much of his work is more figurative and mystical, as in "Specters," 1970. Ann Tinsley combines brilliantly saturated colors with subjects of workers in paintings such as "Harvest of Shame," 1970.

The coincidence of having two exhibitions of African American art simultaneously sparks some speculation about this historical moment and the presentation of American art. These dedicated collectors emerged at a time when the history of African American art was still unwritten, and the artists, although supported by institutions like Hampton University and other traditionally black schools, were little known to the mainstream art world. Today, many of these artists are widely studied and acknowledged as major American artists. The commitment of collectors like the Evans and the Hewitts to collect the art and to show it to the public in traveling exhibitions has played a strong part in this wider knowledge. The Hewitts are particularly concerned with encouraging young people to be artists.

Bank of America is to be saluted for buying the Hewitt Collection (they are planning to donate it to a major museum). Bank of America Foundation also announced at the opening, which was studded with dignitaries like Gwen Knight, Barbara Thomas and August Wilson (who read an essay inspired by one of Romare Bearden's paintings) that they are giving \$10,000 to support music and art education for young people, ages 15 - 25 in after school programs through the Central Area Motivation Program, Catholic Community Services, Casey Family Program and InterAgency Schools. The program will be organized by the painter and muralist, Royal Alley-Barnes. As Royal said at the

opening “All of these artists walking our streets, when we get hold of them, they will be producing euphoric works of art.”

Both exhibitions are accompanied by excellent catalogs: *The Walter O. Evans Collection of African American Art* (The Walter O. Evans Foundation for Art and Literature in association with University of Washington Press, 1999) and *The Hewitt Collection*, (Bank of America, 1999.) The Evans Collection catalog provides historical context for African American art and the Hewitt Collection focuses on biography and analysis of the individual artists.