

THE NEGRO IN MODERN ART

James A. Porter

In the 1920's a revolution in American art was arriving in an atmosphere of economic depression and social pessimism, of class suspicions and misunderstandings, and of religious and moral decline. Our native temper was still gripped by the persistent ideal of individual and corporate enterprise, while a contradictory and complacent nationalism masqueraded in the guise of prosperity. This age which saw the rise of neo-humanism in literary criticism was also inclined to realistic and pathetic dissent in philosophy and education. Its artistic faculty had been exposed to the prolonged shock of the New York Armory Show of 1913, but was now in process of assimilating the cubist sophistication and experimentalist esthetic of Picasso and Gertrude Stein.

In the 1920's, zones of artistic interest and enterprise were sharply divided and defended. One peculiar consequence of the Armory Show had been the encouragement given the work of cosmopolitan realists like George O. (Pop) Hart and Louis Ellsheimius, and the later American representatives of the Impressionist School. But some of the critics and writers who interpreted these men also took up cudgels for the modernism and radical estheticism of those returning expatriates whom Alfred Stieglitz, the great photographer, had attracted to Studio 291. Thus, Walter Pach, Forbes, Watson, Arthur B. Davis and Guy Pène Du Bois could defend with equal ardor the work of these two groups and parry and thrust with Royal Cortissoz, Alden Jewell, F. J. Mather, and somewhat later—Thomas Craven—who stood staunchly by the new bright stars of renaissance American regionalism.¹

As the decade wore on, it was apparent that these forays of one artistic group against another were serving the double purpose of keeping art alive in the United States and providing opportunity for the really outstanding artists to become better known if not better understood. It was also apparent—especially in the 1930's when Thomas Craven's bombshell, *Men of Art*, broke upon the art world with its praise of the stay-at-homes and its condemnation of the School of Paris, that this battle of the styles, engaging Paris-taught experimentalists and third-generation American realists, was not likely to subside for some time to come.

Aware of but little artistic tradition within the race and lacking a clear understanding of the issues confronting American art, the New Negro talents of this period were forced to seek training or at least guidance in the schools and studios of reputable white artists and the leading masters of art pedagogy. Significant, too, at this time, was the fact that Negro art had but few knowledgeable interpreters among Negro intellectuals. Understandably more concerned with general problems of the Negro, race leaders did not too directly or seriously support Negro art or the artist.

It was this general obliquity of the race leaders and the torpor of the Negro masses towards Negro art which at this distance makes the role of Alain Locke in the cultural vanguard of Negro leadership seem all the more remarkable.

Foremost among those who saw the possibility—even the necessity—of interpreting the Negro through his art was this brilliant man and able critic who clearly realized that old facets of cultural growth must dissolve and give place to new. He was evidently less concerned with the popular or the religious or purely altruistic leadership of the disturbed Negro masses than with the importance of providing immediate and current orientation to their artistic interpreters. No doubt he was impressed by the shattering effect of wide social displacement on Negro home life and group tradition; but he was unable to admit that other cultural nuclei and spiritual concentrations could not be made the rallying points of these fragmented groups.

In the now famous book, *The New Negro: An Interpretation*, Alain Locke did not report the case of the older Negro artists of that day as altogether hopeless, although in terse and incisive language he did suggest that they had lived and prayed like Elijah in a hostile desert while fed only by an occasional raven. The careful reader of that book will note that at least a few Negro artists survived the rough artistic weather of the earlier decades; that, indeed, their lack of popularity had been a test of their power of survival. The older artists of that day were Henry Ossawa Tanner, Meta Warrick Fuller, May Howard Jackson, and Edwin A. Harleston. Only the first three were mentioned in the book. They were mentioned critically but not by any means with dispraise. Their work was viewed, however, as representative of an earlier day, but not of the new day.

Though Dr. Locke may have recognized a call to duty in essaying criticism and guidance of the Negro artist, there can be little question that he regarded this activity as challenging and capable of returning to him many satisfactions. It must be remembered that not only did he write three books and many articles, devoted entirely or in great part to this aspect of his interests, but also, and I regard this as very significant, many forewords to exhibitions of art by Negro artists. His interest in Negro art and the artist was both direct and practical, and the broad scope of his vision embraced the past, the present and the future of the artistic experience of his race as proved by the definitive thoroughness of his book, *The Negro in Art*, of 1940.

In this book Alain Locke may be said to have corroborated his own optimistic and certainly persuasive appraisal of the potentialities of the art phase of the New Negro movement. It should be illuminating to quote a brief passage from that part of the work which describes the more recent progress of the American Negro artist.

By the mid-thirties [declared Dr. Locke] a vigorous, intimate and original documentation of Negro life was definitely under way. Fortunately this movement did not lead the Negro artist, as had sometimes been feared, into a backward inlet of racialist art, but, on the contrary, led out to the mainstream of contemporary American art. . . . American artists generally had been developing the Negro subject and theme as a fresh and fascinating new province of native American materials. Beginning with the older generation artists as a rather casual and superficial interest in type portrayal, this strain in our national art had matured with many of the younger contemporary artists to a deep and penetrating interpretation of Negro

life. This happy convergence of interests furnished common ground between the Negro artist and his fellow contemporaries which has, on the one hand, broadened the base of Negro art, and on the other, enlarged the perspective of the Negro artist. It has permanently removed the notion of the Negro as a restricted province to which the Negro artist might be expected to confine his artistic effort. Yet, at the same time, it has challenged the Negro artist to the task of self-revelation, and fortunately, has done so in a competitive way.³

The era of the New Negro was truly one of new directions for the Negro artist; and while there was some seeking after new patterns and novel ways of expression, neither descriptive realism nor expressive realism was entirely abandoned. The fact that realism lay at the very root of our modes and systems of art training and continued to reflect most accurately American moods and manners accounted for its longevity as a channel of communication between artist and public. In the late 1920's American realism was already under attack from modernist critics who scorned the subject picture and were largely responsible for some curtailment of its use.³

Alain Locke clearly understood American realism in both its idiomatic and stylistic manifestations; however, he seems to have mistrusted its direct application to the Negro subject in view of the lingering plantation tradition of wit and humor which had developed in American illustration. On the other hand, he readily gave his approval to those white or Negro artists whose assimilation of Cézannesque or other French post-impressionist influences brought more artistic preoccupations to realism. To me it seems that the essential subject of Locke's fears was the possible descent of the American Negro artists to a dispirited materialistic outlook which in his view would have deprived their work of the intuitions proper to good interpretation and to good art.

To illustrate this difference it can be pointed out that while H. O. Tanner, W. E. Scott, May Howard Jackson and Meta Warrick Fuller were severally representative of the academic phase of twentieth century realism, they nevertheless had distinctly different personalities as artists. And as comparison of their work will show, their elemental differences are even more interesting and important than their elemental similarities. Indeed, this must be borne carefully in mind if we are to understand clearly the nature of that artistic resurgence which marked Negro culture in the third decade of this century. May Howard Jackson, who died in 1931, and Malvin Gray Johnson, a most promising talent whose untimely death the race mourned in 1934, were two artists whose work, though seldom seen in the retrospective exhibitions or in the marketplace today, is still remembered for fine and competent qualities. Nor was the impressionist slant of Harleston, who also died in 1931, simply reactionary effort to adapt impressionist style to the yoke and cart of the Negro theme.

It is the writer's conviction that the diversified legacy of realism handed on by the above-mentioned artists was basic to the brilliant and continuing realist values in the canvases of the social-consciousness painter, Charles White. Certainly he shares at least part of this tradition, as does also his older contemporary, one of the original New Negro talents, Archibald Motley. In line with this substantial tradition of realism is the work of the veteran expressionist

painter, Beauford Delaney, "The Amazing Beauford" of Arthur Miller's unique biographical sketch. And carrying the social commentary of Charles White a step farther is the varied work of Charles Davis of Chicago and of John Wilson of Boston, two youthful painters whose canvases seem to brood over the slum and ghetto wastelands of our great Northern cities. It is also doubtful that Richmond Barthé's sculpture, particularly of the period 1940 to 1948, could be properly appreciated except in the light of that American new realism which various regionalist practitioners were revitalizing. Barthé remains our best exponent of the interpretative realistic portrait, although he has recently given up the *métier* of sculptor.

There is an admitted contrast in point of view between these artists and the pioneers; yet the persistence of a tradition of racial portraiture and certainly of self-expression, forbids us to conclude that they are building altogether new brands of realism. Here and there one sees the influence of various transnational styles on their work. They have largely kept racial subject matter and feeling to the forefront while enlarging the background sources of form from which their statements derive. A case in point is the interesting application of Fauvist technic and simplicities by our own Mr. Wells, to religious themes and American genre.

By 1933 the dehumanizing effect of Cubist principles on form was beginning to appear significantly in Negro painting, sculpture and graphic art. Zestfully introduced to Americans through the Armory Show, this style had first taken firm root in the paintings of Max Weber, John Marin, Niles Spencer and Preston Dickinson, and now was beginning to emerge in the book illustrations and earliest formal experiments of Aaron Douglas, Hale Woodruff, and Malvin Gray Johnson. Its radical contrasts of form hardly affected the normal procedure of our sculptors like Richmond Barthé and Sargent Johnson. However, it may be said to have influenced their work toward better structure and also economy of design and facture.

One of the sources of Cubism had been African Negro sculpture, and it was the recognition of the importance of this connection by Paul Guillaume and other French critics and later by Albert Barnes and Alain Locke which effectually attached the simplicities of African forms to the new experimental growth of Negro art.

In earlier essays, Dr. Locke had urged upon the Negro artist the study and imitation of the ancestral arts—meaning by that, specifically, African Negro art. As a constructive critic, Locke was interested in the sobriety, homogeneity, unique stylism and disciplined craftsmanship of the African forms. He did not seek to impose these values directly through imitation or by recourse to the academic whiplash of repetitious recital. I re-focus his perfectly calm and reasonable viewpoint by the following quotation from his essay, "Legacy of the Ancestral Arts."

Then possibly from a closer knowledge and proper appreciation of the African Arts must come increased effort to develop our artistic talents in the discontinued and lagging channels of sculpture, painting and the decorative arts. If the forefathers could so adroitly master these mediums,

why not we? And there may also come to some creative minds among us, hints of a new technique to be taken as the basis of a characteristic expression in the plastic and pictorial arts; incentives to new artistic idioms as well as to a renewed mastery of these older arts.⁴

Although changes and developments in Negro art brought about by the present generation have justified many of the observations and predictions made by Dr. Locke concerning the total course of our artistic effort, not even he—a vital part, indeed, of this renaissance—could have foreseen all the potentialities and directions of the future. It is worthwhile to discover, therefore, that out of the brief Cubist experimentalism of the artists mentioned, there developed with their pupils, associates and emulators a very substantially creative interest in African and American folklore themes which was and now is a direction of interest distinctly different from American Cubism.

What, for example, has been the course of that trickle of aesthetic and formal influence which the Negro artist received from the so-called "Ancestral Arts?" We need not ask here the question what special uses of this great tradition were with more or less consistency suggested by Dr. Locke. Suffice it to say that he was the first to acquaint the Negro artist with its contemporary effects on European art, and in addition thereto was one of the best interpreters of African Negro art to the western world. We cannot, however, fail to note that it had been Dr. Locke's hope as expressed in "Legacy of the Ancestral Arts" that the African tradition should serve as a counteractive in Negro art to the banalities bred of lifeless academic practices, over-sentimentalized realism, classical decorativism, mere illustration, and other non-artistic outcroppings of our expression.

It is not yet possible to say with finality that African Negro art is a dead issue among us. We can say that, as a compelling tradition whose force and essence are everywhere still recognizable in modern European art, it is no longer used as a vital source of artistic theme or technical departure. Individually and separately there are countless artists who still have recourse to its discipline, precisely as there are many American artists who still check their own native primitivism by the timeless traditions of American Indian art and American Colonial art. But the practical morphological transfer contemplated in Dr. Locke's review is now declining among them, while something far more important, however, and the very fruit of its body, is appearing not only at home but abroad in the practice of many very serious artists of Negro extraction.

As the formal influence of African art declines, one still notices its effects in the work of numerous young Negro artists who annually offer their work in public exhibitions. One sees it also in their blending of its idiom with effects distilled from expressionist abstraction. I have followed its course in the recent sculpture of Selma Burke, who even more recently has been chastening her art in the ever-burning fires of Renaissance classicism. Racial traditionalism and primitivism burn with ever brighter flame in the abstractions of Romare Bearden, in the neo-Ethiopian symbolism of William H. Johnson, and in the occasionally retrospective forms of Richard Dempsey and Eldzier Cortor.

The failure of this aspect of Africanism to create a school of artistic prac-

tice among Negro artists perhaps illustrates the fallacy of promoting technical and formal traditions to a philosophy of art. On the other hand, that understanding of African art which goes back to its creative social and religious conditions has brought about an assimilation of African themes, forms and symbols to abstraction and its variants which seems to us a more fruitful path to follow. Recognizing that there is no such thing as a Negro abstractionist, and that in such a climate the accident of race or color can have but limited meaning, we note that precisely as racial qualities have become completely integrated with other essentials of this genre, so too, whatever was taken over from African precedent has been re-assimilated, re-rooted, and blended with the dynamic qualities of the abstract style.

If among Negro artists of the United States there has not yet emerged a truly great exponent of this phase, shall we say, of racial or traditionalist abstraction, there are several artists working intensively in Cuba, Venezuela, Haiti and Brazil who actually merit this attribute. I refer to the undeniably interesting rise of African folk-themes in the patterns of work by Afro-Cuban, Haitian and Brazilian artists like Wifredo Lam, Roberto Diago, R. Estopiñan, and numerous Haitian sophisticate as well as so-called primitive painters, and various Brazilian Negro artists who, encouraged by the vivid example of the Italo-Brazilian Portinari, have been exploiting their own healthy African culture in Brazil.⁴ Artists in the United States whose practice testifies to similar interests are Eldzier Cortor and Harlan Jackson, who have actually been students of Haitian voodoo; Romare Bearden and latterly, in historicizing mood, Hale Woodruff, in his Atlanta University murals.

Mural painting and relief sculpture by Negro artists still reflect today the social and topical emphasis exercised by the discontinued government program for the arts. Striking progress among our mural painters as a result of the impact of WPA and Federal Arts Projects has elsewhere been observed by this writer. Under this program, it is true, artists of lesser abilities were sometimes assigned walls to decorate along with the best. Private patronage also encouraged many of the younger artists thus limelighted by official recognition. Many of these artists were proved remarkably thoughtful and creative and among them were some few Negro representatives.

But in this kind of art Negro artists generally lacked training or experience; nor did they know of any significant tradition which they could claim as their own. As a consequence, they were influenced by the leading white American muralists—Thomas Benton, Grant Wood, Ezra Winter, or Howard Cook—or even by such foreign painters as Winold Reiss, Brangwyn and the Mexicans, Rivera and Orozco.

With few notable exceptions our mural painters of today still choose to work within the racial theme and scope. Between Aaron Douglas's Fisk and Harlem decorations and the huge painting recently completed by Stallings at Morgan State College, there is scarcely a mural painting that does not have as its main content the episodic portrayal of Negro life and history. In this phase of the third-generation art, the best efforts are outstanding from the hands of Sargent Johnson, Richmond Barthé, Hale Woodruff, Charles Alston, Elmer

Brown and Charles White. However, it must be admitted that the occurrence of such work in the progress of the Negro artist has been too sporadic to encourage belief that it will soon replace easel art as a major interest or activity.

Of course, we must not forget that the racial double standard of employment of artists has limited once again opportunities in mural painting as well as in other relationships. There is no Negro member, so far as I am aware, of the National Society of Mural Painters, nor has the Associated American Artists yet taken in a single Negro artist to promote. Over against this record, however, are the more or less recent gains in the form of prizes, awards, commissions and sales of national or regional scope and importance suggested in the Artists for Victory and Metropolitan Museum of Art contest prizes awarded Jacob Lawrence, Richmond Barthé and Charles Alston, and the superbly expressionistic colorist, Ellis Wilson.

Numerous Negro artists are today, as never before, placing their prints and occasionally paintings, in dealer and museum collections. Our American universities are buying their work out of one-man or group exhibitions; and from this area the most important patronage has arrived with the consistent acquisition of paintings and graphic arts for the permanent collections at Howard, Fisk, and Atlanta Universities.

It has not yet become fully appreciated, however, how firmly some of our artists are rooted in the American tradition of the plastic arts. For example, I do not believe that any writer has clearly shown the spiritual, if not the lineal, descent of Jacob Lawrence from the attractive pictorial traditions of the naive Colonial or the Federal period painters: Hicks and Pickett are his direct ancestors. The flatness, patternistic formality and colorism of his paintings are clearly in the fine masculine tradition of American primitive art. Cannot the same be said for Horace Pippin who reminds us so strongly of the New England painters of over-mantel landscapes-with-figures on the one hand and the painters of still-life on velvet on the other?

Leslie G. Bolling, the very interesting jack-knife carver, has, of course, innumerable forebears among the anonymous American makers of weather-vanes, tavern signs, and ship's figureheads. How much difference it would have meant to appreciation of these men to have stressed this relationship much earlier than now can only be guessed at. Perhaps it only matters today that both Lawrence and Pippin are among the recognized masters of American popular painting.

One might almost conclude that wherever the later work of the New Negro shows the working of change or revision within the style there is evidence of response to foreign masters of international reputation if not to international styles or movements. Certain of the young men of the 1930's afford opportunity to observe this fact. However, as a mere tabulation would by no means be an appraisal, suffice it to say that in the sensitive paintings of Charles Alston, Lois M. Jones, Aaron Douglas and Edward Loper, and in the sculptures of Sargent Johnson and William Artis can be read the record of growth, reconstruction and maturity.

And yet there is a restlessness and a dissatisfaction too poignantly symptomatic of frustration or despair in the work of the better new men to be overlooked. One wishes that some of their efforts at social criticism were more direct and accusatory—less concerned with day-dreaming or with symbolistic wishfulness. More Gallic deftness and honesty of statement and less pretense of indifference or frustration. Over-dramatizing the feeling of separateness from the mainstream of American life because of over-sensitiveness to race discrimination is submission to that weakness of viewpoint considered by Alain Locke as the very condition and source of ghetto art.

It is unlikely, however, that we shall have a great Negro artist among us until American society completely accepts the Negro artist or until the artist is recognized as a spokesman or critic for that society or a part thereof, not necessarily determined by race. This relationship has not yet developed, but there are at least four Negro artists who are now well on the way to achieving such artistic stature. Three of them, Sargent Johnson, Jacob Lawrence and Eldzier Cortor, I have already mentioned. The fourth, a youngster who emerged in the early forties, is Hughie Lee-Smith of Detroit, Michigan. Lee-Smith is one of the most versatile of the young artists. His work in many different media bears the consistency and delivers the impact of most serious and constructive realism.

I have said that there were but few Negro intellectuals who deliberately concerned themselves with Negro art in the 1920's and that only Alain Locke bothered to study and to write about its merits and promise. In addition, Henry O. Tanner was the only Negro painter to enjoy consistent mention in the American press prior to the New Negro movement; but even he was seldom mentioned in books of serious criticism and history devoted to American art. In contrast to this, we observe that today, scattered throughout the pages of American periodical literature, are numerous announcements, reviews and criticisms of single works and group performances by various Negro artists. A number of white writers, nearly all of them historians of art, have been careful to include the contributions of the Negro artist in their general studies of American art as well as their re-valuations of particular periods of art. Among these I would cite Oliver Larkin, Ralph M. Pearson, Winslow Ames, Walter Pach, and Aline Loucheim for their eminently objective writing.

It is certain that the double standards of appraisal and of employment which formerly discouraged the Negro artist are fast disappearing; still, the Negro artist requires to be judged as seriously, as continually and as constructively as any other artist; and he also requires a discriminating, consistent and generous patronage. It is unfortunate that the Negro press has done so little to advance the hopes and aspirations of the Negro artist or to influence the growth of educational opportunity for Negroes in the field of art. As for notices of exhibitions or critical reviews of various important artistic events, one might be led to think by the rare occurrence of anything of this kind in the Negro press that the fine arts were entirely peripheral to Negro culture: deprived of constructive art criticism and lacking other necessary incentives, the Negro artist can scarcely live, much less create. And without the Negro's art, America and the Negro people, more especially, will find that the light of truth, the vision

of beauty, and freedom of expression are that much nearer to extinction in our fair land.

¹ Oliver Larkin, *Art and Life in America* (New York, 1949), Book V, Part II, Chapters 27, 28; Part III, Introduction.

² Alain Locke, *The Negro in Art: A Pictorial Record of the Negro Artist and of the Negro Theme in Art* (Washington, 1940), pp. 9-10.

³ Suzanne La Follette, *Art in America* (New York, 1929), pp. 316-319.

⁴ Locke, ed., *The New Negro: An Interpretation* (New York, 1925), p. 256.

⁵ Erna Fergusson, *Cuba* (New York, 1946), Chapter VII; Seldon Rodman, *Renaissance in Haiti* (New York, 1948); Arthur Ramos, *The Negro in Brazil*, translated by Richard Pattee (Washington, 1939), pp. 131-133.