



Common Wealth

ART BY AFRICAN AMERICANS IN THE MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, BOSTON

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LOWERY STOKES SIMS

With contributions by Dennis Carr, Janet L. Comey, Elliot Bostwick Davis,

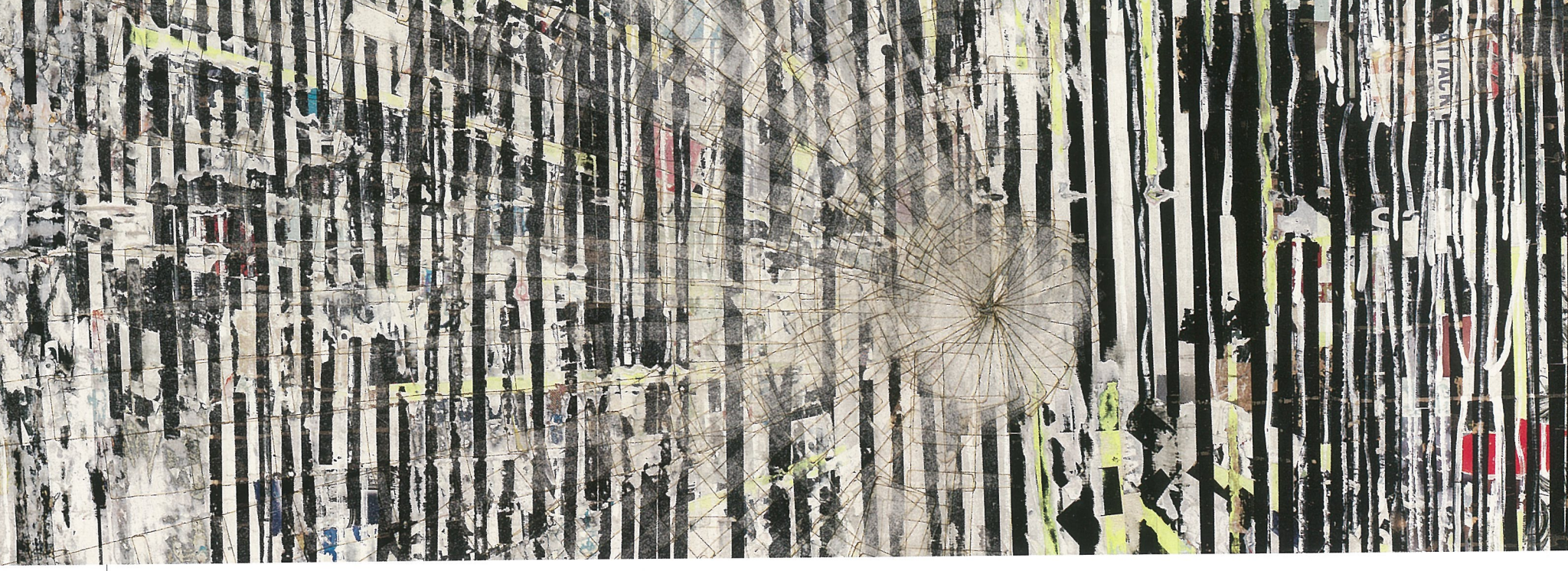
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MFA PUBLICATIONS | MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, BOSTON

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Director's Foreword

The publication of this book celebrates the growing presence of art by African Americans in the collections of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. At the MFA, as at institutions throughout America and indeed throughout the world, this development has been accomplished over the last four decades by a coalition of curators, collectors, and donors as well as art historians, critics, and gallery owners. In our case, a crucial element has been the long and fruitful collaboration between the MFA and the National Center of Afro-American Artists in Boston, whose distinguished curator and director Edmund Barry Gaither served as a curator and consultant to the MFA beginning in 1969, organizing exhibitions and advising on acquisitions. More recently, the Heritage Fund for a Diverse Collection, established in 2005 by the MFA Trustee and Overseer Diversity Advisory Committee, has served as a catalyst for the Museum's continuing efforts to strengthen and diversify its world-renowned collection. The Heritage Fund — built with contributions from more than two hundred individual donors and a *We the People* challenge grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities — has, to date, supported the acquisitions of more than eighty works by American artists of color, including many of the works of art in this volume.

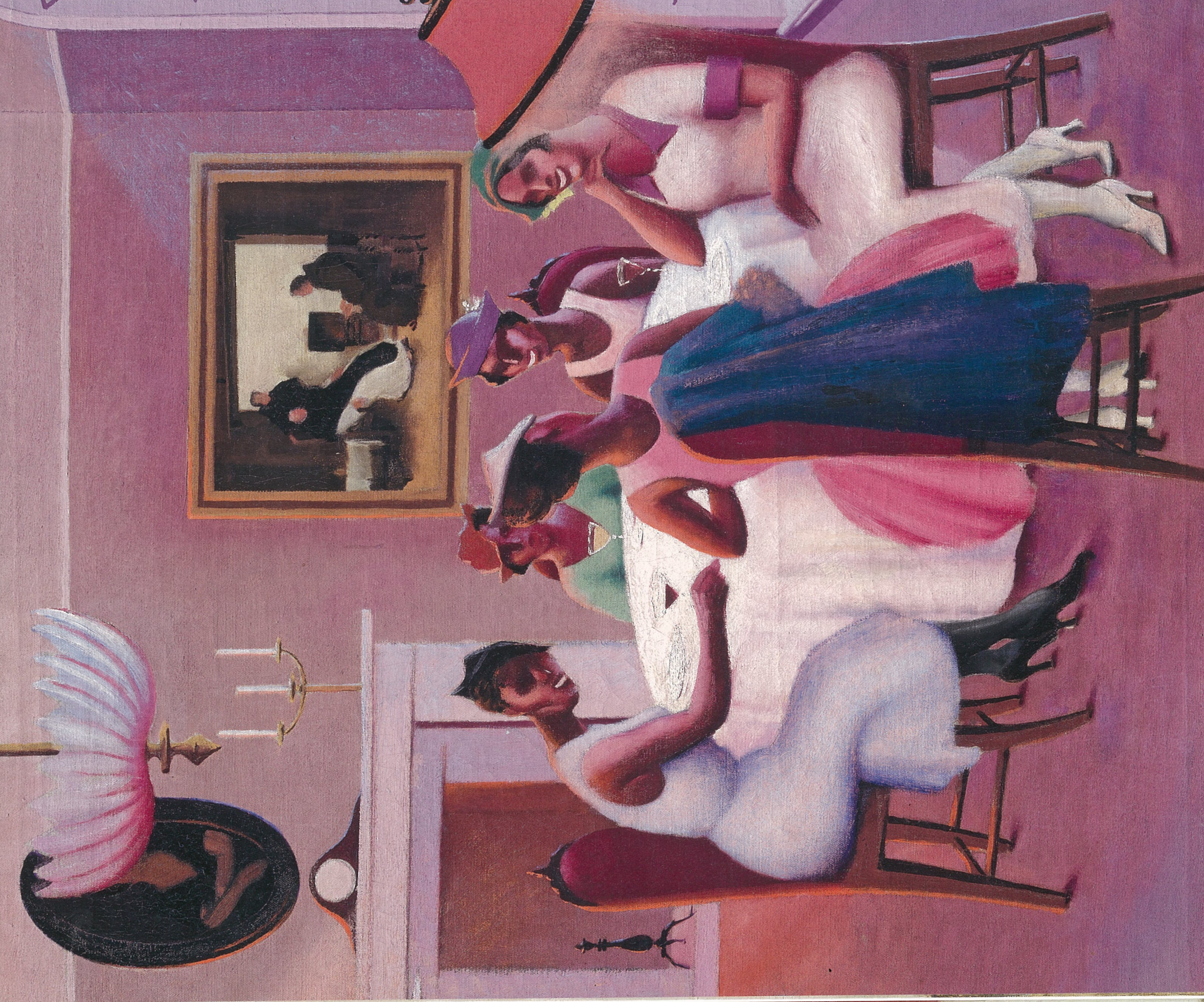
In 2011, supported in part by the Heritage Fund, the MFA acquired a major collection of art by African Americans and Afro-Brazilians from John Axelrod, a Boston native, a longtime supporter of the MFA, and an ambitious and forward-thinking collector. The

acquisition of the John Axelrod Collection transformed the Museum's presentations of American art to include works by many important artists. In addition, this publication was made possible with support from John Axelrod.

With the expert guidance of Lowery Stokes Sims, William and Mildred Lasdon Chief Curator of the Museum of Arts and Design and former president of the Studio Museum in Harlem, along with contributions from MFA curators, we are pleased to offer in this volume some one hundred works by African Americans to represent the breadth and variety of artistic expression now included in our collections. For many years, racial prejudice made African American art all but invisible in our nation's museums; now it is abundantly clear that embracing this art widens the aesthetic perspectives we are able to share with visitors and students. The inclusion of works by Afro-Brazilian and Caribbean artists reflects the wide reach of the African diaspora and reinforces our commitment to presenting art created throughout the Americas. We hope this publication will encourage readers to explore the common wealth exemplified by this rich body of work and to celebrate the accomplishments of the artists who created it.

Malcolm Rogers

*Ann and Graham Gund Director
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston*



You see, whites want black artists to mostly deliver something as if it were an official version of the black experience. But the vocabulary won't hold it, simply. No true account really of black life can be held, can be contained, in the American vocabulary. As it is, the only way that you can deal with it is by doing great violence to the assumptions on which the vocabulary is based. But they won't let you do that. And when you go along, you find yourself very quickly painted into a corner; you've written yourself into a corner.

From Glenn Ligon, *Untitled* (James Baldwin), 1990

The story of African Americans in the visual arts has been told many times, but it still is a tale that is somewhat fraught and controversial. The participation of African Americans as artists within the art historical discourse in this country was marked by the challenges they faced in adapting new forms and standards in their creative endeavors when they arrived in this country as slaves. It was also their task to gain recognition for their achievements in those new genres. This was caught up in their ultimate struggle against vicious stereotyping that labeled them incapable of possessing such basic human qualities as intelligence, creativity, and spirituality. In fact, the cause of African American artists was a potent weapon in the fight for suffrage for African Americans by the abolitionist movement. In this process notions of identity and identification became a central issue. As the Baldwin quotation in Glenn Ligon's 1990 text-based painting *Untitled* (James Baldwin) indicates, African American artists inevitably got caught up and are still caught up in the questions of whether their racial identity and cultural experience should be seen as a central modifier of their work.

The situation of African Americans in the visual arts has closely paralleled their social, political, and economic aspirations over the past four hundred years. For this reason, for African American artists, as the painter Robert Colescott observed, the image is not incidental.¹ This is because images of African Americans created in the society at large have had the effect of reinforcing as well as thwarting those aspirations. Essentializing and degrading images of black stereotypes proliferated as African Americans struggled for full citizenship in this society both before and after the Civil War. So, although a large percentage of the work in this collection features figurative representations of African Americans, this preoccupation with image was not based on mere vanity.

The front line of the story of African American art is carried by innumerable, unnamed slave craftspeople who provided for the needs of their owners and their communities. They are represented in the MFA collection by the potter David Drake and the workers at the Thomas Davies Pottery site in South Carolina. Freed African Americans can also be counted among these pioneers, such as the furniture designer and cabinetmaker Thomas Day and the quilter Harriet Powers. In the fine arts there are examples of the work of Robert Duncanson, Grafton Tyler Brown, and Edward Bannister, who practiced landscape styles in the nineteenth century, as well as that of Henry Tanner, who was perhaps the most well-recognized African American artist in the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He not only received artistic training in a major American art institution, but also eventually established a career in Paris, where he became the first American artist whose work entered the collection of a French museum.

These are but a smattering of individuals who triumphed over obstacles, denial, and hostility to become productive, creative entities who emerged from an enslaved and denigrated population in this country. By the early twentieth century the number of African American artists was growing, as more had access to training in the postslavery era, and by the 1920s the blossoming cluster of historically black colleges and universities — Fisk, Hampton, Howard, and Atlanta universities in particular — were not only offering degrees in the fine arts, but also forming art collections.²

Among the pioneering collectors was William Shepherd, who created a collection of Kuba art in the last quarter of the nineteenth century while he was a missionary in the Congo. He later donated these objects to Hampton University. The bibliophile and collector Arturo Schomburg's collection of African art and the art of African Americans formed the basis of the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. James Herring and Alonzo J. Aden's Barnett-Aden Collection became the focus of salon life in Washington, D.C., in the 1940s and 1950s and featured a multicultural representation of contemporary artists. Very often artists themselves became important collectors as they assumed the role of chroniclers of the art of African Americans, as in the case of David Driskell, an artist, educator, and curator, and Samella Lewis, an artist and writer.

Though African American artists and artisans worked in a variety of media, the task of creating a black self-image fell primarily to painting, sculpture, photography, and printmaking and other paper-based media. In the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s this could be seen in

the work of sculptors such as William Artis, Augusta Savage, Sargent Johnson, and Richmond Barthé and painters such as Lois Mailou Jones, Aaron Douglas, Archibald Motley, Palmer Hayden, Eldzier Cortor, Charles White, John Wilson, and Hughie Lee-Smith. These artists readily accepted the challenge posed by the scholar, educator, and artist James Porter to combat “preconceptions of the Negro character held by certain whites” that “prevented an objective point of view towards . . . the forms of Negro art” and offered no insight into Negro character.³ Echoing Porter, Archibald Motley noted that “with the progress the Negro has made, he [deserves] to be represented in his true perspective with dignity, honesty, integrity, intelligence and understanding.”⁴ To this end photography also emerged as an important medium in the projection of this “New Negro” image, and Roy DeCarava, Gordon Parks, and Ernest Withers are but a few of the individuals who, Deborah Willis and Carla Williams write, “played a crucial role in examining and re-examining the dreams and ideals of the black working classes by making socially and class-conscious images of the African American community.”⁵

At the same time, African American artists engaged in the technical and stylistic innovations of modernism. The relationship of African art to modernism allowed African American artists to both embrace stylistic innovation and explore their ancestral cultures. This was the route that the influential and defining critic and historian of African American art Alain Locke encouraged. In his seminal essay, “The Legacy of the Ancestral Arts,” first published in 1925 in the anthology *The New Negro*, Locke encouraged African American artists to look to African art for inspiration and guidance in their search for an art connected to their African heritage. Rather than encouraging a mastery of traditional styles, however, he focused on the “almost limitless wealth of decorative and purely symbolic material” in African art. As can be seen in this selection of works, Elizabeth Catlett, Marion Perkins, and Jacob Lawrence adapted the geometric aspects of African art to the forms and proportions of their figural work. Hale Woodruff and Norman Lewis found a visual vocabulary in the glyphs and symbols of African decoration and writing. And William H. Johnson and Beauford Delaney were attracted to a more dramatic approach to form in African art that inspired modernist movements such as fauvism and expressionism.

While African American artists grappled with the challenges of modernism in relation to their ancestral heritage, they also had to navigate the presumptions of the larger art world that they would have a “natural” access to a “primitive” — that is, African — aspect

to their work. The Harmon Foundation, which was an important supporter of black creativity, even posed the challenge to African Americans to develop “an art devoid of academic or Caucasian influence.”⁶ This explains the particular interest in the work of self-taught artists such as William Edmondson and Horace Pippin, who often were seen as tapping into an essential state of black existence. The collector and “negrophile” Dr. Albert Barnes extolled what he perceived to be the greater “authenticity” in the work of Pippin in comparison to what Barnes called the “sophisticated primitivism seen so often among school-trained pretenders,” such as Lawrence and Johnson.⁷ This cultivation of black vernacular culture was also supported by individuals such as the poet Sterling Brown, who promoted “a treatment of the Negro masses (frequently of the folk, less often of the workers) and with more understanding and less apology” in the creative expression of African American artists, writers, and dancers.⁸ In the 1980s, besides the revival of interest in so-called folk art, there was a revival also of interest in crafts such as the basketry of Mary Jackson and the quilting of Clementine Hunter (see cats. 8, 119).

The rise of liberation movements for civil rights and independence from colonial powers after World War II provided a context in which artists of African descent began to contribute to the global discourse about art and culture. That global dimension is demonstrated in the work of Wifredo Lam, a Cuban African Chinese modernist who after a seventeen-year sojourn in Spain and France returned to his native Cuba, where he developed a hybrid visual language that synthesized the formal elements of cubism, the technical approach of surrealism, and the symbolic import of Afro-Cuban motifs. In the United States Norman Lewis, Hale Woodruff, and Romare Bearden interfaced with the larger art world, engaging the modalities of abstract expressionism.

By the 1960s these artists were joined and succeeded by a new generation of abstractionists who had the benefit of graduating from mainstream art schools such as Yale, the University of California, and the Art Institute of Chicago. Artists such as the sculptor Richard Hunt and painters Felrath Hines, Sam Gilliam, Al Loving, and Martin Puryear matured in a highly charged environment where the liberation impulse in the African American community demanded a new type of imagery that was assertive, politically loaded, and figurative. Dialogues about the viability of “blackstream” (i.e., figurative) and “mainstream” threatened to derail the collective efforts of African American artists. These dialogues demonstrated the controversial aspects of “African American” as a modifier and raised questions about the validity and

viability of this designation in the visual arts and whether it implied a set of stylistic, thematic, and technical characteristics.

Out of the morass of the aesthetic debates of the 1960s and 1970s, African American artists discovered that there were a number of stylistic options available to them. In the context of postmodernism, photo-based work, text work, stereotyping, and caricature conventions, history and politics became grist for their mill. A key figure was Robert Colescott, who in his fifties found a personal vocabulary of satire and irony wrapped in funky figuration that was comparable to the work of the Bay Area cartoonist R. Crumb. Colescott in particular has skillfully used stereotypes that presumably make whites feel alternately amused and guilty and blacks anxious and angry to draw us all to what he calls “the one two punch,” implicating all of us in our prejudices and preconceptions.⁹

It is interesting to note that out of the stylistic dialogue of the 1960s and 1970s, figuration has clearly prevailed and manifested itself in the paintings of Kerry James Marshall, with their themes of class mobility and notions of blackness and urban geography, and Carrie Mae Weems’s historical and domestic photographic tableaux. There are also Fred Wilson’s acts of co-option of art history and museological practice in service of a black narrative that have their counterparts in Kara Walker’s complex compositions; whether mural-sized or intimately scaled, they explore the narratives of slavery, sexual exploitation, and power relationships in a figuration that explodes the sedate pretension of silhouette artistry (see cat. 28).

Nayland Blake’s forthright explorations of race and sexual preference and the transgendered identities that are the subject of Lyle Ashton Harris’s work indicate how African American artists are at the center of issues about race and sex in this country. In a related vein, Mickalene Thomas borrows from a Robert Colescott maneuver in her work that reinterprets a historical masterpiece with black characters that expand the context of the original painting, *Le Sommeil (Sleep)*, of 1866 by Gustave Courbet. And María Magdalena Campos-Pons has employed photography, installation, and performance to explore race and gender through her experiences and roots in Cuba that mirror Wifredo Lam’s personifications of the female as the essence of the Cuban environment.

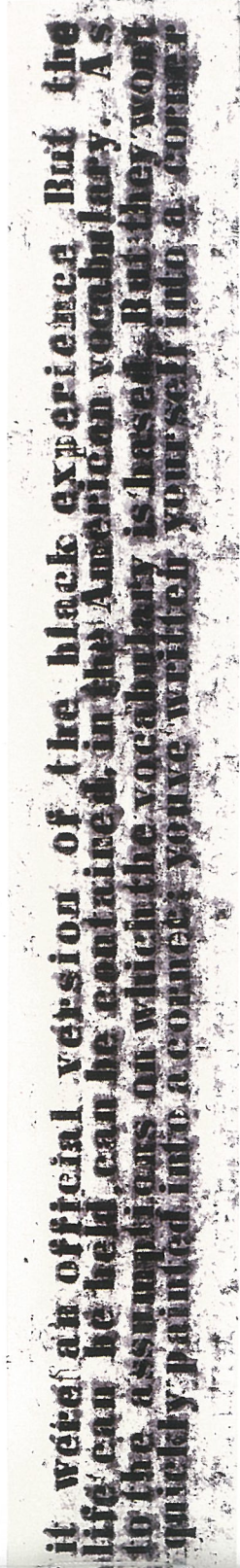
Portraiture has also had a renaissance in the work of Dawoud Bey in photography and Kehinde Wiley in painting. Bey has garnered

a reputation for his socially engaged practice in which he works with the residents of different neighborhoods under various circumstances to create images of great invention and power. Since the early years of this century, when he was an artist-in-residence at the Studio Museum in Harlem, Wiley has been creating an iconography that focuses on male beauty (although women have appeared in his work more recently). He has taken his practice of posing his figures in heroic guises to locales as far-flung as France, Israel, India, Sri Lanka, Brazil, Senegal, and China.

Over the past two decades there has also been an interesting interface between craft media and techniques and the fine arts, and African American artists have been at the forefront of this development. Kara Walker’s deployment of the virtuosity of the cut-paper technique to create silhouettes is one example. Joyce Scott has engaged performance and installation to inform her more intimate pieces, which have transformed notions of jewelry with their often biting and cogent narrative content. Her technical expertise in beading and stitchery has made her a major figure in both the genres of art and craft. Willie Cole approaches the variety of materials he deploys in his work from the point of view of a craftsman. He is known for his ability to burn, twist, and otherwise manipulate steam irons, hair dryers, plumbing elements, and shoes into forms and meanings that draw on the mimetic potential of these materials.

The statement by James Baldwin that Glenn Ligon incorporates in his painting indicates the frustration that African Americans in the creative sector often feel when confronted with the expectations of the market. Questions about the validity, the propriety, and the currency of separating African American art as a distinct category were not broached as an issue during the organization of this book. Today, as much as African American artists seek to defuse the exclusionary potential of this categorization — employing rubrics such as “post-black” or “post-race” — the content of their work is more often than not mired in the specificity of their experiences and perspectives as African Americans in this country and in the world. It would seem that African Americans are still grappling with what W. E. B. Du Bois described as the conflicted double nature — the “twoness” — that we experience both as Africans and as Americans.¹⁰ But as the work of African American artists has always demonstrated, they are increasingly adept at avoiding being stereotyped or “painted into a corner.”

You see, whites want black artists to mostly deliver something
vocabulary won't hold it, simply. No true account really of
it is, the only way that you can deal with it is by doing great work
let yourself that. And when you go along, you find yourself



GLENN LIGON

American, born in 1960

1 | *Untitled (James Baldwin)*, 1990

Glenn Ligon was one of several African American artists who emerged in the 1990s as postmodernism and its emphasis on identity-based concepts gained critical ground in the art world. In this work, as in a number of others, he refers to the writings of the noted African American author James Baldwin. The most dramatic and visually complementary example is Ligon's series of *Coal Dust* paintings, where he renders the text of Baldwin's memoir about visiting a Swiss village in the company of his then-partner and confronting the racial alienation and isolation they experienced there.

Ligon's text-based work focuses our attention on Baldwin's text by frustrating easy access to its content through smudging or outright obliteration. This also has the effect of emphasizing the more painterly or textural aspects of his work. His hand-stamping of the text, letter by letter, brings a historical reference to the hand-set type that would be found in pre-digital printing. As a result the letters of the text become marks that work with the smudges and smears to create a nuanced surface with just enough gesture to justify associations with painterly abstraction. — LSS

Oil on canvas

15.9 x 213.4 cm (6¼ x 84 in.)

Seth K. Sweetser Fund, 1991-546



Vessels of Memory

VESSELS OF MEMORY

The function of memory is a potent force for African Americans. They were torn from their native lands, societies, and families and transported thousands of miles under horrific conditions. If those conditions didn't disrupt their connection with their past, then the premeditated efforts of the slave infrastructure to erase any remnants of habits or objects or customs that they might have brought over with them from Africa would. The elimination of those memories was effected in specific ways. First, Africans were forced to convert to Christianity and to learn to denigrate what was seen by the power structure as the "pagan," ungodly practices they had learned in Africa. Second, they were literally stripped of any clothing, adornment, or accessory and then required to put on what was considered decent and appropriate apparel. And third, they were forced to learn a new language. This concerted effort on the part of slave owners points to a psychological need for dominance as well as a fear of the power of their chattels' memories of their existence as free people.

This section includes a number of works that serve as containers of memory: primarily vessels that are containers and buildings that resonate with the residual auras of individuals who inhabit them or pass through their doors. The examples of pottery are especially telling in this regard. One of the interesting aspects of memory in Africa is that, with notable exceptions, information, customs, and traditions are for the most part transmitted by mimetic activity and craftsmanship. In Western traditions, on the other hand, much of this transmission has been through writing, so a potent weapon in the attempt to erase the cultural memories of African Americans was through an act of prevention: they were forbidden — by law — to learn to read and write. So the storage jar by Dave Drake is as much an example of remembered craftsmanship as it is an act of civil disobedience of the first order.

Dave Drake was a slave on a South Carolina plantation that specialized in the production of pottery. His oeuvre has emerged from the multitude of surviving examples of nineteenth-century American pottery because of the brief, haiku-like verses and observations he tended to inscribe on his pots. Taken as a group — compiled by the dedicated collectors Arthur Goldberg and Samuel Hardman — they function as a diary of inner feelings, pithy observations, and biblical references.¹ How Dave learned to read and write remains one of the most open secrets in the history of slavery in this country. Leonard Todd, a descendant of Dave's owner, postulates that it was a matter of conscience with his ancestor, who was caught up in a religious revival movement that mandated that one's soul could find salvation only in

the word of God. That Henry Drake thought enough of his slave to consider that he had a soul worth saving and taught him to read and write is an extraordinary expression of humanity in and of itself.

One of the most familiar pottery types produced by African Americans are the so-called face jugs made at several locations in the Carolinas, where the naturally occurring clay soil provided a ready medium. These fascinating creations, sometimes compared to British-made Toby mugs, combine local materials with distinctively African traditions. Originally made by African American slaves, the vessels feature faces with wide eyes, open mouths, and bared teeth that are sometimes filed into jagged forms, amplifying the ferocity of the expressions. Eyes and teeth are made from kaolin, a material with a long history of spiritual significance and ritual use in West Africa. The T-shaped arrangement of the eyebrows and nose, and the oval of the mouth, show as much abstraction as would be found in an African mask or figure, but in these jugs the features have been modified by enough realistic touches to project an individualistic aspect to each of the heads. They are among the finest examples of a syncretistic expression of Africa and Europe created in the Americas over the past four hundred years.

Willis "Bing" Davis acknowledges these nineteenth-century predecessors in his *Ancestral Spirit Vessel*, created more than a century later. This is just one example in the artist's oeuvre in which he has evoked the memory of African American ancestral spirits. The concept of "ancestralism" was promoted by Alain Locke, the prominent African American theorist, critic, and historian, who believed that African American artists would find their true voices only through a connection with their African past. It is important, however, to note that Locke realized that in the twentieth century African Americans could be as ignorant of Africa as anyone else, so, rather than promoting a scrupulous copying of African art, he encouraged young artists to use its design sense to find a "new style, a distinctive fresh technique, and some sort of characteristic idiom."² Davis has followed this dictum and created something that is both an homage to traditional African pottery and an articulation of Afrocentric expressions — an approach adopted by African American artists in the context of the civil rights and Black Power political movements in the United States.

Whereas the pottery of Dave and the Davies Pottery makers represent a mixture of cultural references, the basket with lid by Mary Jackson, on the other hand, represents an art form whose materials and techniques have been handed down largely unchanged through generations. This basket is the direct descendant of those made by

Africans who were brought to South Carolina to cultivate rice. The weaving technique Jackson has used was employed to create a multitude of baskets that were used to winnow and process rice in the ways that these methods would have been followed in Africa. In this case, the memory was allowed to be maintained because it suited the economic system in which the basket makers functioned. Given the human propensity for individual expression, however, Jackson and her contemporaries have found a means for personal gestures within this traditional craft.

In contemporary art the form of a house — with a gabled roof, a suburban confection popularized in the post-World War II period — has become a singular motif. During the 1970s, in the work of abstract artists such as Joel Shapiro and Jennifer Bartlett, the house served as a means to reintroduce content into art. Since then, myriad artists have enacted domestic dramas within this form, indicating its key position in the exploration of memory and identity in art. John Biggers's *Shotguns* presents an architectural style of habitation that is associated especially with African Americans in the South. The outsize women who emerge from the doors of each house can be seen as functioning as vehicles of memory for the family-community collective, and the pots in the doorway of one house serve as containers in the original sense of the vessel. Biggers establishes the motif of the pointed gables of the houses as a repetitive element that not only indicates the infinite stretch of memory into the past and into the future, but also sets up a somewhat hallucinatory visual effect.

In Therman Statom's glass structures, the elements of memory can float and be seen exposed to the viewer. *Delta Winter* is divided into four compartments, within which scenarios of different memories can be seen, whereas *Cast Glass House* is a particularly self-referential work that exploits the translucency of the glass as a revelatory medium. The notion of individual elements carrying memories can be the basis of dream interpretations, as it can allow individuals to indulge in nostalgia. In this spirit the two assemblages by Betye Saar, *The Good Old Days* and *The Differences Between*, bring together a number of mementos — fans, gloves, photographs, embossed frames — that carry the essence of their former owners. They are one aspect of the work Saar has produced over the past six decades that has deconstructed and reconstructed images and objects associated with African Americans — from photographs to stereotypical memorabilia from the popular market — in an effort to recuperate the memories that lie within them and placate any negative associations that accompany them. — LSS

DAVE DRAKE (OR DAVE THE POTTER)

American, about 1800—about 1870

For Lewis J. Miles Pottery

2 | Storage jar, 1857

In the Edgefield district of rural South Carolina, African Americans participated in the development of a major center of pottery production, where alkaline-glazed stoneware was first produced in North America. By the 1820s the Edgefield area was one of the most populous regions in the South, and local residents purchased vast quantities of utilitarian stoneware crocks and jars from local manufacturers for storing food. Enslaved African Americans (and, later, freed blacks) provided the labor force for these potteries: building and fueling the kilns, digging and preparing the clay, mixing glazes, turning the potters' wheels, and firing scores of vessels.

The craftsman who signed his work "Dave the Potter" is the foremost member of this group. In addition to being an exceptionally skilled craftsman, Dave was literate. This was an act of defiance and resistance by both him and his master to interdictions against teaching slaves to read and write. Leonard Todd, a descendant of the family that owned Dave, reminds us that attitudes toward teaching slaves to read and write "began to shift in the early years of the nineteenth century, as a religious revival known as the Second Great Awakening swept the South."³ Confronted by the

assertion that each individual should find his or her own salvation by reading the Bible, devout and conscientious slave owners had to come to grips with the fact that keeping their slaves illiterate would endanger their souls. Since Dave's master, Henry Drake, subscribed to these beliefs, "this," writes Todd, "may have been the beginning of Dave's journey to literacy."⁴

At least one-quarter of Dave's surviving pots are inscribed with verses, some slyly humorous, others poignant. The couplet on this pot reads: "I made this Jar for Cash — / though its called lucre trash," most likely a reference to the biblical passage 1 Timothy 3:8, which warns the deacons of the church not to be "greedy for filthy lucre." His thick-walled storage vessels are unusually monumental and made with great technical skill. Their aesthetic appeal lies in their handsome size and the free flow of the soft green and gray alkaline glazes against the local red clay body; their emotional resonance lies in Dave's signature, a powerful reminder of individual dignity in slave society. — KHL

Stoneware with alkaline glaze

H. 48.3 cm (19 in.), diam. 45.1 cm (17¾ in.)

Harriet Otis Cruft Fund and Otis Norcross Fund, 1997:10



I made this jar for corn -
thought it called - were they -

Daniel





UNKNOWN AMERICAN

Probably made at the Thomas Davies Pottery

3-5 | Face jugs, about 1860

Although made in the Edgefield district of South Carolina by enslaved potters who produced functional stoneware jars sold primarily to whites, these jugs were not commercial products. They are exceptionally rare examples of objects made by slaves for their own community and directly link West African practices with African American slaves. As early as 1862, they were known to be made by slaves “for their own purposes,” according to a plantation and pottery owner, Colonel Thomas Davies.⁵ Scholars now believe that those uses were spiritual rather than practical.

Face jugs were much smaller than the utilitarian vessels made for storing gallons of preserved meats, pickled vegetables, and other foodstuffs for large plantation communities. Instead, these vessels, typically just four to eight inches high, are distinguished by their sculptural facial features, including pronounced brows, noses, lips, and ears. Although their clay bodies are alkaline-glazed

stoneware like the Edgefield commercial wares, their eyes and teeth are made of unglazed white kaolin clay—a feature that required technical skill and extra labor, since kaolin shrinks more than the body clay during firing.⁶ Kaolin is an important material in ritual practices in many African cultures, particularly in *nkisi* figures used in Kongo cultures to channel and contain spiritual powers.

The use of kaolin in face vessels demonstrates a direct and specific connection between west-central Africa and Edgefield: slaves from Kongo were imported to Edgefield just before the earliest slave-made face vessels were produced there in the early 1860s. In 1858 an illegal slave ship, the *Wanderer*, docked at Jekyll Island, Georgia. Of the 407 Africans aboard—most from Kongo societies—over 100 were sent to Edgefield, where many were put to work in the potteries. At least one of these, called Romeo Thomas, is known to have worked in Thomas Davies’s pottery. Significant research and oral history indicate that slaves in the region used face jugs covertly in African religious activities such as conjure, root magic, charms, and spells—practices that helped slaves re-create and maintain African belief systems in America.⁷ — KHL

Stoneware, alkaline (ash) glaze; kaolin clay inserts
The John Axelrod Collection — Frank B. Bemis Fund,
Charles H. Bayley Fund, and The Heritage Fund for a
Diverse Collection, 2011.1807, 2011.1808, 2011.1809

Cat. 3. Face vessel with handle at top and spout at rear
21.6 x 17.8 x 18.4 cm (8½ x 7 x 7¼ in.)
2011.1807

Cat. 4. Face vessel with spout at top
14.3 x 11.7 x 12.1 cm (5½ x 4½ x 4¾ in.)
2011.1808

Cat. 5. Tall ovoid face vessel with spout at top
17.1 x 12.1 x 11.7 cm (6¾ x 4¾ x 4½ in.)
2011.1809