Abstracts for Curatorial and Art Historical Panels

Friday 1:00-2:00 Toward a History of Washington Modernism: The 1933 Display of African American Art at the Smithsonian National Museum

Charles Brock, National Gallery of Art

While previous histories of American modernism, including accounts of the Harlem Renaissance, have revolved primarily around New York City, current scholarship is now acknowledging the many modernisms that flourished across the United States before midcentury. Perhaps the most significant of these alternative histories is the evolution of Washington during the interwar years (1918-1941) from a city largely isolated from contemporary currents in the arts to a modern metropolis and cultural leader. This transformation occurred as Washington played a key role in the national and international events that shaped modern consciousness and American national identity: World War I, the Great Migration, the Great Depression, and World War II. By looking at the accomplishments of prominent Washingtonians such as Alain Locke, James Porter, Duncan Phillips, Holger Cahill, Roy Stryker and others, and the role of institutions like Howard University, the Phillips Collection, the Smithsonian, and the New Deal Art agencies, not in isolation, but in relation to each other, we can begin to reconstitute a broader history of modernism in Washington that has been largely overlooked and understudied.

Entitled Exhibition of Works by Negro Artists at National Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institute, the 1933 display of contemporary African American art that we are considering for Collaboration2 addressed the pressing cultural questions of the day from Washington’s predominantly segregated, often politically charged, complex vantage point. Unlike the earlier, pre-Depression displays of African American art held on the Mall in 1929 and 1930 that had repackaged shows organized by the Harmon Foundation in New York, the 1933 exhibition was a distinctly Washington affair. Directed by Locke, Porter, and James Herring at Howard, featuring Washington-based artists James Lesesne Wells and Lois M. Jones, sponsored by Carter Woodson’s Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, and held at the Smithsonian’s National Gallery of Art (then housed in the Smithsonian’s National Museum along with the collections of the Museum of Natural History), the ambitious show demonstrated how varied African American culture was in the city and how interconnected the identities of Washington’s various art institutions, in fact, were. Taking place just as the New Deal art initiatives were being brought on line, the exhibition appears to have bolstered claims for Washington as an important site for ongoing debates about definitions of American art, African American Art, and American modernism especially vis-à-vis New York.
In dialogue with the research and comments of other contributors, my proposed article will attempt to situate the 1933 exhibition in the context of other significant events related to modernism in Washington during the interwar period. While primarily devoted to documenting the essential history of Washington modernism, if space allows, I may also make some very brief, tentative proposals regarding a definition of Washington Modernism as opposed to other forms of modernism found in New York and elsewhere.

Negro Artist exhibitions at the National Gallery, 1929-1933

Michèle Gates Moresi, Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture

This essay will explore exhibitions of Negro Art, as they were called, in 1929, 1930, and 1933 at the Smithsonian’s National Gallery of Art. The two earlier shows in 1929 and 1930, created by the Harmon Foundation and sponsored locally by the Race Committee, operated with an agenda to promote racial understanding, empathy, and provide black artists with a venue to show their works in an integrated, national platform. The later show in 1933 was created and sponsored by Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, an organization dedicated to educating the public about the history, accomplishments and great potential of African Americans.

In both cases neither of the shows originated from the National Gallery itself, but were hosted by the nascent art museum which did not have its own building at the time; Art exhibitions were displayed in the galleries of the Natural History Building. All the same, both shows contrasted with the established representation of race (particularly that of Africans and African Americans) in the museum which provides a unique opportunity to interrogate discourses of national and racial identity. Indeed, tensions between a neutral cultural event versus the “political” motivations of the shows’ sponsors speak to the concerns of the day. Additionally, the differences between the earlier and later exhibitions can tell us still more about competing visions of African American identity.

Examining the motivations for the exhibitions, their locations in the National Museum building, and the contents of the shows can reveal for us the complexities about perceptions of national identity and race as they played out in these moments at the Smithsonian’s art gallery. Further, as a significant portion of the Harmon Foundation art collection would eventually go to the Smithsonian in the 1960s, laying a foundation for the one of the largest and most significant collection of art by African Americans in the world, a brief look at those circumstances can help us to see an evolving understanding of African American artists and their place in the American art world.

Herring, Porter, and Locke's Perspectives on the 1933 Exhibition

Tobias Wofford, Virginia Commonwealth University

The comprehensive 1933 Exhibition of Works by Negro Artists at the Smithsonian Institution’s National Gallery of art sought to introduce a broad public to the creative expression of African Americans at the height of what we now refer to as the New Negro or Harlem Renaissance. The exhibition was notable in its wide-reaching presentation of Black art making including work by students trained at schools and workshops across the country, displays of music from Africa and the U.S., and Black contributions to modern art. It sought, in essence, to reveal the breadth of Black artistic creativity.
Yet, as much as the 1933 exhibition embodied Black creative expression, it also reflected an art-critical and art historical tradition that developed around such work. This is seen in the participation and responses of three important figures: Alain Locke, James V. Herring and James A. Porter. Each played important roles in interpreting and presenting African American art both in Washington D.C. and across the nation. Yet each also came from distinct backgrounds that framed their engagement. This presentation will examine Herring, Locke, and Porter’s response to the 1933 exhibition considering how Herring’s background as curator, Locke’s background as a philosopher, and Porter’s background as an artist all colored their interpretations of African American art at this important juncture.

How Children Became Modern: The Place of Students in the Exhibition of Works by Negro Artists and in Interwar Washington

Seth Feman, Chrysler Museum of Art

When James A. Porter reviewed the 1933 Exhibition of Works by Negro Artists for The American Magazine of Art, his account appeared below a large image identified as “Child’s Painting, Elementary Schools, Washington.” The illustration signaled the show’s somewhat unusual inclusion of numerous student works along with those by leading African American artists. The student work represented a range of ages and learning levels—the work came from local public schools, Washington’s Southeast House Art Studio, Harlem’s Free Art Workshop and Studio, and Atlanta and Howard Universities—and reviewers noted that the installation of their works suggested progressive stages of artistic achievement. The illustrations in Porter’s review followed suit, offering a series of images that began with “Child’s Painting,” advanced to works by a junior high school student and a participant in the Free Art Workshop, and culminated with works by named artists.

The reason for including the students’ work may seem straightforward. Many of the participants studied at the schools, community centers, and universities where the show’s headlining artists taught; the show’s organizer, Howard University art professor James V. Herring, often collaborated with local public schools and neighborhood organizations to build wider support for the arts; and the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History (ASNLH), an organization founded by educator Carter G. Woodson to raise awareness about black history, had sponsored the show to correspond with its annual meeting, which brought educators from throughout the country to Washington to discuss issues confronting black schools.

The inclusion of student work and the notion of artistic development expressed through the work’s installation also represent a complex and uneasy resolution to competing efforts to modernize education in Washington in the 1930s. Since WWI, Washington educators had been modernizing schools by implementing models of scientific management, streamlining operations, setting efficiency quotients, establishing curricular timetables, and administering achievement and aptitude tests—modern administrative standards that were especially challenging to realize while maintaining an inherently inefficient and inequitable segregated school system and while operating under the byzantine federal and local bureaucracy that oversaw school governance and budgeting. At the same time, many African American art teachers versed in progressive educational models found ways to develop lessons that focused on project-based activities, community-centered lessons, student-pupil mentoring and collaboration, and self-directed learning—modern pedagogical ideals that were especially challenging to realize due to the limited resources, rundown facilities, and restrictive oversight of black schools, as well as due to administrators’ simultaneous efforts to modernize classroom activities by standardizing them. This essay traces how these contradictory forces—the desire to regiment but also to release, to standardize
but also to individualize—were expressed in the 1933 exhibition, and it suggests that these contradictions were at the heart of teaching children how to be modern.

From Newspapers to Networks: Broadcasting Art of African Americans in the Nation’s Capital

John A. Tyson, University of Massachusetts, Boston

“Crowd Views Art of Negro.” Readers of the Washington Post encountered this headline on November 1, 1933. The article that followed describes the Exhibition of Art by American Negro Artists sponsored by the Association for the Study of Negro Life and Culture held at the National Gallery within the Smithsonian Institute, which thousands attended. The newsworthiness of the show was not merely based on spectator numbers; the anonymous reporter tells us that exceptional works by the artists James Porter and Edwin Harleson were on view. The exhibition was further remarkable, given that Washington was highly segregated. Blacks rarely enjoyed prime positions within the capital’s institutions; hanging works by African American artists on the walls on the National Gallery had important political implications. While the paper does not explicitly dissect the exhibition’s politics, its coverage broadcast the show to a wider public. For similar reasons, Black newspapers—some from quite far afield, such as the Pittsburg Courier—also produced accounts of the exhibition.

This essay will assess the role of the media and social elites as authorizers and amplifiers of culture. Focusing on their period reception, my text will historically contextualize the impact exhibitions of art by Black Americans. Indeed, in 1929, the Harmon Foundation’s similar show of art by African Americans catalyzed a change in reporting: Ada Rainey, one of the Post’s principle art commentators, began running articles celebrating the merits of Black Americans’ art. Rainey was not the only tastemaker paying attention. Other actors in elite social networks attended too. Thus, in order to properly comprehend the discourse around art by African Americans, I will draw from diaries of major figures, such as Duncan Phillips and Agnes Meyer (Stieglitz circle poet, art collector, and the wife of the Post’s owner).

Moderator:
Tuliza Fleming, Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture
Organizer:
Robin Veder, Smithsonian American Art Museum

Friday 2:35-3:20 Curator's Panel: Curating African American Abstract Art

• Kevin Tervera, Associate Curator of African Art and Department Head, Arts of Africa, the Americas, Asia, and the Pacific Islands, Baltimore Museum of Art
  “Locating Africa in African American Abstraction: On Jack Whitten and Melvin Edwards”

Abstract
As any art history undergraduate can tell you, Africa has long been associated with abstract artistic expression. It was abstraction that first captured the attention of artists and art critics alike—from Alain Locke and Carl Einstein to Loïs Mailou Jones and Pablo Picasso—and helped launch the continent into the art historical canon. Africa and African art were also foundational to the art and theory produced by the early twentieth century modernists. But what about more contemporary artists? As abstraction became the ur form of Euro-American Modernism and
developed histories independent of the continent, how and in what ways did artists look to the Africa and the diverse art found there? This paper focuses on two contemporary African American abstract artists—the late Jack Whitten and Melvin Edwards—and explicates how and in what ways Africa and African abstraction shaped their creative thinking and output. Additionally, it uses the Baltimore Museum of Art’s forthcoming exhibition monographic exhibition on these artists to explore the challenges and opportunities faced by curators and scholars who hope to tease out the influence of competing strands of abstraction—African, American, and European—in contemporary art.

- **Dr. George N'Namdi, Founder, N'Namdi Center for Contemporary Art**
  “Community and Collecting: The History of the N’Namdi Collection”
  **Abstract**
  This presentation is constructed to demonstrate how George R. N’Namdi took an abstract art collection and utilized it as a platform to preserve African Diaspora artistry. Through various contemporary medians African American artist have been able to magnify the complexities of the “Black” experience that push back on historical stereotyping and political oppression. The craftsmanship and artistic enterprise embedded in the career of George R. N’Namdi is explored through his collection, art institutions and development work. All of which is invaluable not only in its dedication and promotion of artist of the African Diaspora, but also in the way its diverse assemblage speaks to a universal human experience.

- **Evelyn Hankins, Senior Curator, Hirshhorn Museum**
  “The Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden after Forty Years: Transforming a Private Collection into a National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art”

  When the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden opened to the public in 1974, the galleries were brimming with artworks from the permanent collection, all of which were gifted by a single donor, Joseph H. Hirshhorn. Over the last four decades, the Museum’s collection has grown to encompass almost 13,000 artworks and now includes time-based media, installation art, and an increasingly diverse artistic presence; nevertheless, Mr. Hirshhorn’s donations still comprise the majority of the collection and many significant gaps persist. This presentation will consider the various strategies the Hirshhorn has undertaken to specifically rethink the way it exhibits and collects the work of African American artists, as well as the challenges it continues to face as a museum with local, national, and international audiences.

**Panel Moderator: Melanee C. Harvey, Assistant Professor, Department of Art, Howard University**

**Saturday 11:15-12:15 New Art Histories Scholars Panel**

- **Zoma Wallace, MFA, Curator, DC Commission on the Arts & Humanities**
  “Saving Grace: Considering the Poetics Within Theaster Gates’ Abstracted Reclamations as Acts of Grace”
  **Abstract:**
  The sculptural work of Theaster Gates has been discussed in terms of poetic play between memory as both essence and material, and also in terms of transference of histories - held within constituent components - into bodies of knowledge, rescued with ethical intentionality. However, critical analysis has not yet addressed the verb of his particular brand of sculptural abstraction as the graceful movement towards *saving*. Using Martin Heidegger’s expansion on the definition of
saving, to “fetch something home into its essence, in order to bring the essence for the first time into its proper appearing”, along with Friedrich Schiller’s aesthetic considerations of *grace*, my project addresses Gates’ sculpture as poetry that employs the free play of imagination as intervention on behalf of experiences of Being that would otherwise disappear unnoticed and underappreciated. I argue that grace, as beauty of form hewn under the influence of a morally inclined imagination, is the artist’s abstract vehicle for revealing and validating representations of near-forgotten Black existences. This project enjoins Schiller’s notions of grace with Heidegger’s take on saving in the pursuit of a new lens to view Theater Gates’ constructions in the round as graceful marks made to imbue subjective eternality.

- **Melissa Messina, Independent Curator & The Mildred Thompson Legacy Project**  
  “Mildred Thompson and ‘Magnetic Fields: Expanding American Abstraction’”  
  **Abstract:**  
  Melissa Messina will give a brief introduction on the life and work of the under-recognized American abstract artist, Mildred Thompson (1936-2003), noting her connection to James A. Porter. She will touch on the renewed interested in Thompson’s work and the changing dialog around the history of abstraction as one more inclusive to women and artists of color. She will contextualize the discussion with her experience co-organizing the *Magnetic Fields, Expanding American Abstraction, 1960s to Today* traveling exhibition.

- **LeRonn P. Brooks, Ph.D., Assistant Professor, Africana Studies, Lehman College, CUNY**  
  “Black Art: Imagining Futures”  
  **Abstract:**  
  My paper will explore the ways contemporary art by black artists establishes and what is in fact useful for revolution or reclamation is this exchange. It will also speculate on how strategic uses of history spur new artistic forms during this troubling moment.

  **Panel Moderator:** Raél Salley, Professor in Art History at MICA and Visiting Professor, African American Studies, University of California, Los Angeles