

Celebration of African America Art History

AUDIENCE: (Who is this tour for?)

SUBJECT/THEME: African American Art in History

THEME STATEMENT: (In 1-2 sentences, expand upon the basic theme/title to describe what will be taught/learned on your tour.)

Celebrate two centuries of art by African American artists. Explore how artists have creatively used various media to document and depict the African American experience through time.

OBJECTS: (Choose 6-8, plus 2 alternates; try and select objects of various types, materials, and historical periods)

- **Quick Stop:** Addie Pearl Nicholson – Housetop quilt nine-block “half-Log Cabin” variation, 1974
- Henry W. Bannam – Cleota Collins, 1932
- Vincent Smith – Basketball Players
- **Quick Stop:** Jacob Lawrence – Subway Acrobats
- Beauford Delaney – Jazz Quartet, 1946 (Untitled, 1947)
- Tawny Chatmon – God’s Gift, 2019
- Kehinde Wiley – Santos Dumont – The Father of Aviation II, 2009
- James Phillips – Cosmic Connection, 1971
- Dawoud Bey – Untitled #3 – Cozad-Bates House and Untitled #18 – Creek and House, 2017



#1 Addie Pearl Nicholson Housetop quilt nine-block “half-Log Cabin” variation, 1974

Questions:

- What textiles do you treasure?
- What qualities might the share with this quilt?
- Michelle Obama’s Portrait

History:

- “Housetop” pattern of concentric rectangles uncommon outside of Gee’s bend, a rural part of Alabama now known for its unconventional quilts
- Brought patterns over from Africa and incorporated western patterns, only men made quilts in Africa
- The **quilts of Gee's Bend** are quilts created by a group of women and their ancestors who live or have lived in the isolated African-American hamlet of Gee’s Bend along the Alabama River
- Quilts influenced in part by patterned Native American textiles and African textiles
- Along the way they developed a distinctive style, noted for its lively improvisations and geometric simplicity
- Many of the quilts are a departure from classical quilt making, bringing to mind a minimalist quality
- Influenced by the isolation of their location, which necessitated using whatever materials were on hand, often recycling from old clothing and textiles
- The quilts of Gee's Bend are among the most important African-American visual and cultural contributions to the history of art within the United States
- Addie made her quilt with 9 blocks but disrupted the pattern by rotating each block in different directions
- Started piecing quilts when she was 16, eventually with help from her husband Daniel
- Dan’s father worked on a plantation but couldn’t buy things for the family
- Had 10 children, while they worked in the field kids would lay under shady tree guarded by dog- quilts were utilitarian
- Born in 1931, father bought land from the McDuffie Plantation, government intervened when people weren’t being treated right (unfair sharecropping practices) – 150 acres of land
- Lived in Coy, got married when she was 18, farmed the land
- Opportunity to move to Gees Bend when land became available

- The ferry, which provides critical access across the Alabama River, was shut down in 1962 in what was viewed as an attempt to make it more difficult for African-American residents to travel to the county seat of Camden to register to vote
- She's associated with the Gees Bend Quilting Association and was the president of the Freedom Quilting Bee in 1966 – a cooperative to help women earn money through selling quilts
- Died in January, 2021

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Addie_Pearl_Nicholson

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Quilts_of_Gee%27s_Bend

<https://www.soulsgrowndeep.org/artist/addie-pearl-nicholson>



#2 Henry W. Bannarn Cleota Collins, 1932

Questions:

- Looking at this portrait bust how would you describe the personality of Cleota Collins?

History:

- Material – looks like bronze but being poor and a student could not afford – it's plaster and painted bronze
- Born in Oklahoma, Bannam moved to Minneapolis and at 18 became the first African American to win first prize for a painting at the state fair
- Grandfather was an escaped slave heading north to Canada and ended up here (house on 55th and Queens)
- Scholarships from General Mills Co-Founder James Ford Bell and Phyllis Wheatley House helped his attend what is now MCAD
- It was there he created this portrait bust of singer and civil rights activist Cleota Collins
- Cleota went to France and Italy to study, went to Ohio State – a founder of National Association of Negro Musicians
- She had to leave the country to be trained to come back to teach
- Completed his education in New York and his studio on 306 141st street became a center and meeting place for African American artists, musicians, and poets during the Harlem Renaissance (1930s) – Salons where people would gather and discuss their experiences

- One of the preeminent contributors of the movement, with Charles Alston (next to Beauford Delany)
- Was admired as a teacher and mentor to young artists
- He worked as a Works Progress Administration artist for the Federal Art Project and taught art at the Harlem Community Art Center in New York City,
- Although he is primarily known for his work in sculpture, he was equally skilled as a figurist and character artist in the various paint mediums
- Died in 1965 in Brooklyn

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henry_Bannarn

<https://www.nga.gov/features/exhibitions/outliers-and-american-vanguard-artist-biographies/henry-bannarn.html>

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cleota_Collins

NO PICTURE

#3 Vincent Smith – Basketball Players

Questions:

- What stands out for you in this painting?

History:

- Born in 1929, Vincent D. Smith was a Brooklyn native and innovative African-American artist
- By the late 1950s, he incorporated various modern approaches into his figurative painting practice, including expressionism, collage, politically- and socially-conscious subject matter
- Urban settings, texture in the background, geometric designs
- Received little credit because art scene was dominated by abstract expressionists
- Inspired by a Cezanne painting exhibition at MoMA, Smith quit a postal office job to become a full-time artist in 1952 (also worked for the railway and was in the army)
- His paintings of nocturnal urban scenes also reflected what he experienced firsthand on the streets of Brooklyn, and the nightlife of the Village and Lower East Side. *“During the day I painted and at night I went to the jazz clubs”*
- Smith’s painting further developed with his incorporation of collage elements in his later, more political 1960s paintings (become multi-media)
- Smith was certainly aware of Romare Bearden’s groundbreaking use of collage in 1964, and the artist collective Spiral Group, where Bearden’s turn to collage was encouraged
- Vincent D. Smith’s paintings engage many of the social issues of postwar America
- He created a unique, expressive voice in addressing the conflict and culture found in urban African-American communities
- Smith’s work reflects an awareness of the white-washed art-historical narrative; this he attempted to change, by expressing the dynamic reality of life in Black communities in New York

<https://www.swangalleries.com/news/african-american-art/2019/09/artist-profile-vincent-d-smith/>

<https://www.alexandregallery.com/artists-work/vincent-smith - tab:thumbnails>

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vincent_D._Smith



#4 Jacob Lawrence

Subway Acrobats

Questions:

- How does this differ from Basketball Players (painting to the left)?

History:

- Painter. A social realist, Lawrence documented the African American experience in several series devoted to Toussaint L'Ouverture, Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman, life in Harlem, and the civil rights movement of the 1960s
- Lawrence worked in a laundromat and a printing plant. He continued with art, attending classes at the Harlem Art Workshop, taught by the noted African-American artist Charles Alston
- His mother put him and his two younger siblings into foster care in Philadelphia. When he was 13, he and his siblings moved to New York City, where he reconnected with his mother in Harlem.
- Lawrence was introduced to art shortly after that when their mother enrolled him in after-school classes at an arts and crafts settlement house in Harlem
- Lawrence continued his studies as well, working with Alston and Henry Bannarn another Harlem Renaissance artist, in the Alston-Bannarn workshop
- At the very start of his career he developed the approach that made his reputation and remained his touchstone: creating series of paintings that told a story or, less often, depicted many aspects of a subject
- He was one of the first nationally recognized African American artists – and the first to have a show in a gallery space
- Lawrence, a northerner raised in New Jersey and New York, often used his art to explore race, equality, and justice
- Lawrence referred to his style as "dynamic cubism", although by his own account the primary influence was not so much French art as the shapes and colors of Harlem
- THE black artist, at 23 did 60 wood panels of people migrating from the south
- Migration series – 30 panels – sometimes all 60 panels come together - series portrayed the Great Migration, when hundreds of thousands of African Americans moved from the rural South to the urban North after World War I
- Had to check into a hospital for 11 months – painting was a part of his therapy
- People in cars performing for money
- These two paintings – show black people as people, doing everyday things – in the 60s during the Civil Rights time

- Ended up living and working in Washington state, visiting artist at the University of Washington in 1970 and was professor of art there from 1971 to 1986

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jacob_Lawrence

<https://americanart.si.edu/artist/jacob-lawrence-2828>

<https://lawrencemigration.phillipscollection.org/artist/about-jacob-lawrence>

<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Jacob-Lawrence>

<https://lawrencemigration.phillipscollection.org/the-migration-series>



#6 Tawny Chatmon God's Gift, 2019

Questions:

- What questions come to mind when you look at this portrait?

History:

- Tawny Chatmon paints, embellishes and manipulate her photographic prints with 24 karat gold leaf and acrylic paint to create arresting portraits that celebrate Black beauty, identity and culture
- God's Gift features a young black child inspired by the Gustav Klimt's lavish portraits of white Viennese women a century earlier
- Chatmon grew up in Germany and was drawn to the Old Master paintings she saw on field trips but was haunted by the absence of Black figures in American and European art
- In Chatmon's words this portrait is meant, "to act as a counter narrative and redemptive measure to uplift and elevate Black hair, tradition and culture freeing us from negative stereotypes
- This girl is an ethereal vision, looking up toward the sky and appearing to float in her gold dress like an angel
- Photography based, self-taught artist from Maryland, her perspective changed when she started photographing her father during his battle with cancer
- She typically combines overlapping of digital collage and illustration
- After refining and printing, she frequently experiments with various art practices by hand-embellishing with acrylic paint, 24-karat gold leaf, and materials such as paper, semi-precious stones, glass, and other mixed media
- Creates imagery that celebrates and honors the beauty of Black childhood and familial bonds while at times addressing the absence and exclusion of the Black body in Western art, magnificence

- The portraits I create today are always inspired by my children and my desire to contribute something important to a world I want them to thrive in
- I choose to frame my work in golden antique frames that I collect from estate sales, galleries, auctions, and private sellers (the majority that previously held artwork of subjects that looked nothing like mine or reminiscent of frames hanging in museums of the past and present) and purpose-built contemporary baroque frames custom created for each piece.
- ***“For those who encounter my work, I want them to stop, I want them to pay attention, I want them to not be able to look away”***

<https://www.tawnychatmon.com/about>
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tawny_Chatmon
<http://galeriemyrtis.net/tawny-chatmon/>



#5 Beauford Delaney Jazz Quartet, 1946 (Untitled, 1947)

Questions:

- How does this compare to the last painting?
- How's it different? The same?
- Look at the way he uses paint and color? What do you think?

History:

- Beauford was an American modernist painter and remembered for his work with the Harlem Renaissance in the 1930s and 1940s, as well as his later works in abstract expressionism following his move to Paris in the 1950s
- Born in Knoxville, Tennessee, Delaney's parents were prominent and respected members of Knoxville's black community
- Some of his work was noticed by Lloyd Branson an elderly American Impressionist and Knoxville's best known artist
- By 1929, the essentials of his artistic education complete, Beauford decided to leave Boston and head for New York
- He arrived in New York during the Harlem Renaissance and Delaney felt an immediate affinity with this "multitude of people of all races – spending every night of their lives in parks and cafes" surviving on next to nothing

- In New York "he painted colorful, engaging canvasses that captured scenes of the urban landscape...his works from that period express, in an American Modernist vein, not only the character of the city, but also his personal vision of equality, love, and respect among all people"
- Delaney established himself as a well known part of the bohemianism of the art scene of the period. His friends included the "poet laureate" of the period, Countee Cullen, artist Georgia O'Keeff, and writer Henry Miller, among many others. He became the "spiritual father" of the young writer James Baldwin
- In Greenwich Village, where his studio was, Delaney became part of a gay bohemian circle of mainly white friends; but he was furtive and rarely comfortable with his sexuality.
- His paintings expressed the excitement of city life in vivid colors, energetic lines, and quick brushstrokes
- He often preferred to visit one of the clubs when he was in Harlem rather than join in the serious socio-political discussions or "Negro art" questions that were taking place at the "306 Group" or the Harlem Artists Guild
- Moved to Paris in 1952, as the center of the art world was moving to New York
- His years in Paris led to a dramatic stylistic shift from the "figurative compositions of New York life to abstract expressionist studies of color and light" (see Untitled in the same gallery)
- Was painting abstract expressionist paintings before it was a movement
- By 1961, heavy drinking had begun to impair Delaney's often fragile mental and physical health
- Periods of lucidity were interrupted by days and sometimes weeks of madness and this pattern continued for the remainder of his life.
- Alzheimer's started and he was committed to St. Anne's insane asylum in Paris and died in 1979
- In 1985 James Baldwin described the impact of Delaney on his life, saying he was "the first living proof, for me, that a black man could be an artist. In a warmer time, a less blasphemous place, he would have been recognised as my Master and I as his Pupil

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Beauford_Delaney

<https://www.moma.org/artists/40994>

<https://www.theartstory.org/artist/delaney-beauford/>

<https://wellsinternationalfoundation.org/portraiture-exhibition/>



#8 James Phillips Cosmic Connection, 1971

Questions:

- Is there a narrative here?
- How does this piece make you feel?
- Teeth, African mask, instruments, face

History:

- Visual artist James Phillips was born in 1945 in Brooklyn, New York. Phillips attended the Fleisher Art Memorial School in Philadelphia in the 1960s
- He then went on to study at the Philadelphia College of Art (University of the Arts for Philadelphia) from 1964 to 1965, followed by a brief affiliation with the Lee Cultural Center in 1968. Phillips then attended the Printing Trade School in New York City
- From there, he became a member of the Harlem-founded Weusi Artist Collective, a group of young artists who made African iconic imagery and symbols a central part of their work, from 1969 to 1973
- In 1970, Phillips met the founding members of AfriCobra (African Commune of Bad Relevant Artists), a group that was committed to incorporating African aesthetics, iconography and positive political imagery into African American art
- This piece is a tribute to John Coltrane, and he painted it while in a residency at the Studio Museum in Harlem
- Coltrane – irregular beat, very mathematical, Coltrane broke down measures playing faster and faster and it's demonstrated in the zig zags (some bigger and some smaller)
- Phillips was after that feeling that Coltrane's music evoked, was a backdrop for one of Coltrane's concerts
- Visual manifestations of sound, painter of light and rhythm
- Kente (comes from the word basket) Cloth – African, refers to a Ghanaian textile, made of handwoven cloth, strips of silk and cotton. Historically the fabric was worn in a toga-like fashion
- As a painter, Phillips has participated in over seventy group and solo exhibitions in galleries and museums both nationally and internationally
- His works have been specially created for public art projects for the city of Baltimore, Howard University in Washington, DC, the Department of Parks in New York City and the transit system for San Francisco, California and is highly collected throughout the nation
- In 1994 Phillips was commissioned by the Philadelphia Airport to create a permanent piece of art for their domestic wing - A triptych entitled *Gateways to The World*

- The pursuit of his ancestral heritage is the heartbeat of Phillips’ art. The link between art and culture is translucent. Phillips draws his audience into both the spiritual and political realm of his work, emphasizing an integral part of African and African-American tradition and culture through his use of icons and color
- His art speaks of African mythology and storytelling as evidenced in African-American quilting – whose patterns and designs are deeply rooted in Africa. Phillips’ work is aesthetic and political, visual and musical, it defines and defends.
- Painting are part of his own consciousness and identity

<https://www.newdoorcreative.com/james-phillipsthe-shape-of-things-to-come>

<https://www.thehistorymakers.org/biography/james-phillips>

https://art.state.gov/personnel/james_phillips/

<https://profiles.howard.edu/james-phillips>



#7 Kehinde Wiley

Santos Dumont – The Father of Aviation II, 2009

Questions:

- What sparks your curiosity when you look at this painting?
- See photo of statue below

History:

- Known for his highly naturalistic paintings of Black people, frequently referencing the work of Old Master paintings (Renaissance and Baroque)
- Born in LA, father is Nigerian and mother is African American, has a twin brother – mom enrolled him in art classes after school to stay out of trouble
- Father left to go back to Nigeria, leaving mother to raise 6 kids – welfare checks and “thrift store” on their front sidewalk
- BFA from Yale - an artist-in-residence at the Studio Museum in Harlem, which Wiley has later stated "made [him] the artist [he] is today"
- In a number of his paintings, Wiley inserts black protagonists into Old Master paintings.
- Wiley’s portrait paintings are known for their bright and colorful backgrounds. These intricate backgrounds are purposefully different from the portraits they are based on.

- Much of Wiley's work focuses on male figures. This is an intentional choice by Wiley to reflect on the lack of female figures in art history in portraits due to societal norms
- When later commenting on his fascination with the mugshot and its influence in his art, Wiley noted that when he found one on the street, it altered his view of what a portraiture could be as well as solidified his feelings about the portrayal of black men in the world. Wiley saw that there was something lacking. He then turned to his background in classical paintings and began to compare this new type of portraiture to the ones he studied from the eighteenth century
- Immense body of work became known as, "The World Stage." Models are dressed in their everyday clothing and asked to assume poses found in artwork from their location's history. It's a juxtaposition of "the 'old' inherited by the 'new' – who often have no visual inheritance of which to speak."
- As he continues to paint models from streets around the world, he is increasingly painting them not based on Western painting anymore, but art from these countries that have a wealth of history
- The models, dressed in their everyday clothing most of which are based on the notion of far-reaching Western ideals of style, are asked to assume poses found in paintings or sculptures representative of the history of their surroundings
- The subjects in this painting chose to position themselves as the two “fallen heroes” in a well-known public monument dedicated to one of Brazil’s pioneer aviators, Alberto Santos-Dumont. By depicting these black men as the pioneers of Brazilian aviation, *Wiley* instills his anonymous subjects with a powerful and heroic identity, essentially immortalizing them in oil paint.
- Alberto Santos-Dumont was a Brazilian aeronaut sportsman, inventor and one of the few people to have contributed significantly to the early development of both lighter-than-air and heavier-than-air aircraft
- Painted President Obama’s portrait, took 2 years and was unveiled in 2018 at the Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery
- President Obama saw in Wiley's work that he is able to elevate an ordinary person to look like a royalty and to lift them up so that they belong as a part of American life, since Obama believed that politics should be about the country unfolding from the bottom up and not the other way around.

<https://kehindewiley.com/>

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kehinde_Wiley

<https://www.gq.com/story/kehinde-wiley>



#9 Dawoud Bey

Untitled #3 – Cozad-Bates House and Untitled #18 – Creek and House, 2017

Questions:

- Step closer and take a minute to let your eyes adjust
- Get past the darkness, and what do you see?
- Landscape and house

History:

- American photographer and educator known for his large-scale art photography and street photography portraits, including American adolescents in relation to their community, and other often marginalized subjects
- Bey is a professor and Distinguished Artist at Columbia College Chicago
- MacArthur Fellow in 2017 and is regarded as one of the "most innovative and influential photographers of his generation"
- Bey didn't receive his first camera until he was 15, and has stated until that point he wanted to become a musician. Early musical inspirations included John Coltrane
- A product of the 1960s, Bey said both he and his work are products of the attitude, "if you're not part of the solution, you're part of the problem. This philosophy significantly influenced his artistic practice and resulted in a way of working that is both community-focused and collaborative in nature
- Street photography in Harlem, always asked consent, collaborative
- Portrays communities and histories that are underrepresented or even unseen
- *'Night Coming Tenderly, Black'* (2017) is a series of 25 photographs by Bey that reimagines the final part of the journey along the 'Underground Railroad'. The inspiration for the project stems from Roy DeCarava's (1919-2009) dark photography. The exhibition title was inspired by a line from a poem titled *'Dream Variations'* by Langston Hughes.
- Photographs taken in Cleveland, often blankets or clothing were hanging outside the house to signify it was a safehouse
- Bey explains that the intention of the project was "to recreate the spatial and sensory experiences of those moving furtively through the darkness."
- Bey is known to arrange his photographs in pairs and grids. Pentagram designers aimed to echo this notion by creating a "strong but neutral framework for the series", presenting the two projects side by side.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dawoud_Bey

<https://www.mfah.org/exhibitions/dawoud-bey-an-american-project>



[Santos Dumont](#), [Centro](#), Center and Historic Center, [Rio de Janeiro](#), Brazil

