
INCLUDING AFRICAN IN THE CURRICULUM

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Any comprehensive historical examination of the works of African American visual artists will reveal significant contributions made to the cultural heritage of this nation since the seventeenth century to present times. From the earliest African American visual artists to their contemporary counterparts, these visual recorders from and of a unique American experience have transcended deprivation and adversity to make lasting contributions to American art and culture. A resilient spirit and the determination to maintain the rich legacy of their triple heritage (African, American, African American) through aesthetically strong, complex and culturally diverse art forms earn the African American artists a place on the platform of mainstream recognition along with artists from the majority culture.

Any honest academic analysis, therefore, of American art history or art appreciation should include in-depth discourse on early and contemporary African American artists. Unfortunately, however, this has not been the case. Traditionally the African American artist has been given little or no attention in art history and art appreciation textbooks in the United States—artistic and academic disenfranchisement, so to speak.

The model in mainstream textbooks, periodicals, critical reviews and newspapers has been to systematically exclude African American artists, or to provide minimal information on a few “brand name artists.”

February, Black History Month, has become the vehicle sanctioned by academic institutions for exposing student populations to the works of African American artists. The problem here is that institutions for the most part have developed a rigid attitude of exhibiting African American art only during February. This practice greatly limits exposure opportunities for artists and runs the risk of sending a negative message to students which suggests African American artistic contributions have been so minimal as to require only a month of attention per year. To avoid the appearance of pigeonholing these artists, some institutions exhibit African American art during January and often allow the exhibition to bleed over into February. In this instance the institutional tactics have changed; however, the rigid restrictive mentality has remained.

This routine of exclusion has created a phenomenon wherein discourse on African American art is conducted as though it were separate and apart from that of the majority culture. In short, African American artists, art and related creative scholarship have been victims of the same forces that promote political, social, economic and educational segregation.

Like other forms of expression, art is not structured in such a rigid manner that any one type is acceptable to all. The most important issues should be the quality of the work and its

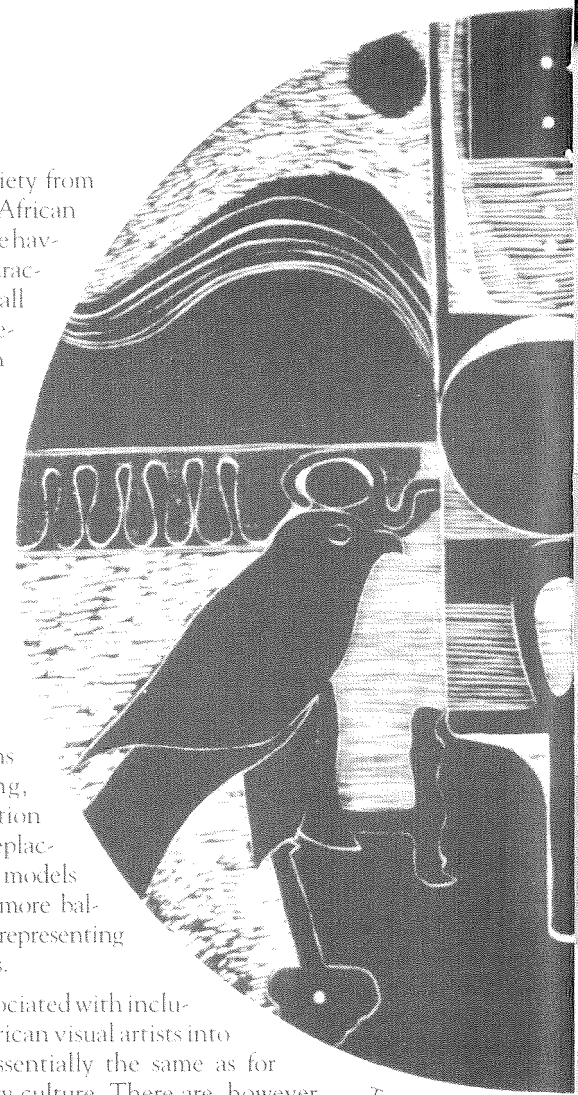
relevance to the society from which it comes. The African American artist, while having some distinct characteristics, is similar to all other artists in his desire to express his own individual sensitivity to form and order while interpreting the social, political and cultural phenomena of the times in which he lives. Art, therefore, is a universal language whose essence knows no racial boundaries.

Among institutions of higher learning, multicultural education has the potential of replacing the old academic models of exclusion with a more balanced view of history representing all of the contributors.

The pedagogy associated with inclusion of African American visual artists into course content is essentially the same as for artists of the majority culture. There are, however, three important factors that determine the extent to which cultural diversification of course content can be implemented successfully.

The first has to do with the extent to which the instructor is knowledgeable on the subject. This factor may appear obvious; however, the absence of comprehensive knowledge on the history of early and contemporary African American art is probably the most common deficit shared among arts educators. The reason for this paucity of knowledge is the Eurocentric thinking and images that dominate the training of art educators throughout the United States.

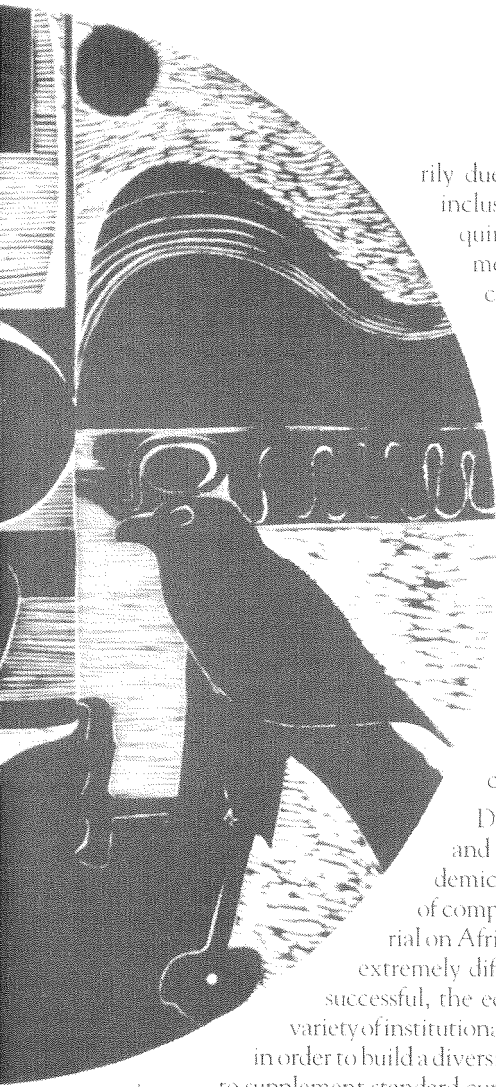
The second factor is a sensitive one and one that is rarely openly discussed. It has to do with the psychological attitude of the instructor toward the subject matter. Since African American art has been excluded from extensive scholarly study prima-



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rily due to racial prejudice, its inclusion in course content requires a personal commitment on the part of the educator to teach the material objectively without bias.

Finally, a successful program of diversifying course content depends heavily on the identification of resources with which to obtain available materials on the subject. Limited and often inadequate resource materials on artists is a pressing problem and an impediment to the development of course content.

Due to the legacy of racism and its residual effect of academic exclusion, major sources of comprehensive printed material on African American artists are extremely difficult to identify. To be successful, the educator has to rely on a variety of institutional and community sources in order to build a diversified body of information to supplement standard curriculum materials.

However, the reality of time constraints associated with teaching loads, departmental, institutional and personal obligations restricts the amount of time an instructor can devote to researching and developing new curriculum materials beyond those readily available within college resources.

A solution designed to meet this challenge was the completion of a research project that identified and developed for KSC faculty and regional institutions information packets on a selected group of African American artists. The goal of this project was to increase diversification of course content materials in the visual arts by developing a depository of materials on African American artists usually inaccessible to the instructor.

The project collected slides and biographical information on 50 east coast African American artists, male and female. Many of the artists represented in the collection have achieved regional

and national acclaim among art critics, museum curators, and their peers but are not represented in mainstream educational publications. Other artists in the collection are represented in a variety of textbooks and art periodicals.

The majority of the artists are formally trained and have received terminal degrees in their fields. A number of the artists are educators and teach at some of the most prestigious universities in the nation. Several are heads of art departments. Many of those represented have achieved financial independence and work full time at their craft and are represented by art galleries and agents. Others produce art regularly, working daily in their studios while holding teaching positions.

The artwork created by these 50 artists demonstrates a broad range of artistic styles and subject matter. The work illustrates high degrees of technical and conceptual ability, aesthetic quality, humanistic strength and diverse cultural character. The myth that African American art is a monolithic entity is clearly destroyed as evidenced through the work present in the collection.

The researcher's conversation with these artists revealed their strong recognition of their triple heritage as a common source of inspiration. Each artist, however, has developed a unique visual language in which to define form, and each demonstrates a mastery of tools, materials, and techniques.

This research project was funded through a faculty development grant and summer stipend award from the college with assistance from the Visual Arts Department. It provides one of the basic factors necessary for further in-depth discourse on African American art in the areas of art history and art appreciation. The presence of this diverse body of information, which will be kept in the Visual Arts Department and loaned to local schools and colleges, can assist, if used regularly and presented objectively, in the removal of longstanding exclusionistic attitudes towards African American art.

The collection provides KSC faculty with diverse two- and three-dimensional images in slide form with accompanying biographical information on the artists for easy inclusion into course material.

Regular use of the material increases exposure of student and faculty populations to African American art, thereby creating a better informed academic community. The presence of the information provides seed material for further research by faculty and students and gives recognition to African American artists' contributions to American art. ●

Editor's Note: This article is a report of the work done by the author to fulfill requirements of a Faculty Development Grant and a 1992 Summer Stipend.