

## African American Artists

In honor of **Black History Month**, this piece features African American artists. Full disclosure, this obviously can't cover all the major artists, so I am focusing on some who spoke to me. The artistic careers of the 13 artists represented in this piece span the late 19<sup>th</sup> century to the present day. They were active in a broad range of media and styles, from impressionist to abstract expressionist painting, to sculpture, collage, and quilting. The African American experience through the years is a common thread across artistic styles and media.

**Horace Ossawa Tanner** (1859-1937) was called the most distinguished African American artist of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Student of Thomas Eakins as the only African American at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, Tanner went on to study and live in Paris, where he lived until his death. He is known for his landscapes and depictions of biblical themes.



Tanner, *The Banjo Lesson*, 1893



Tanner, *Daniel in the Lions' Den*, 1907-1918

**Horace Pippin** (1888-1946) was self-taught, an artist who painted a range of themes, from landscapes to portraits to biblical subjects. He was injured during WWI, a sniper's bullet leaving his right arm partially paralyzed. He started painting as a form of physical therapy. His intention was to paint life exactly as he saw it.



Horace Pippin, *Interior*, 1944



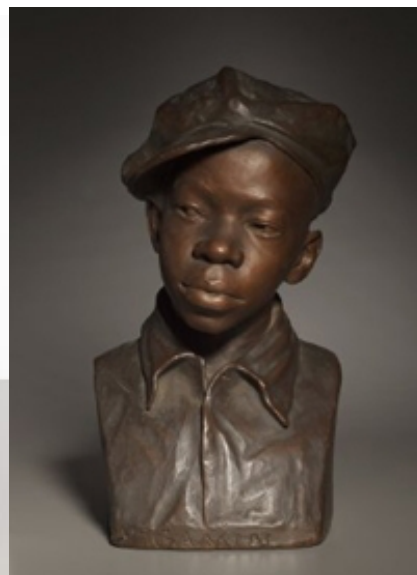
Horace Pippin, *Supper time*, 1940

**Augusta Savage** (1892-1962) is a relatively unknown American sculptor, who achieved some renown during the Harlem Renaissance. She once said, "I am a Leap Year baby and I have been leaping forward ever since." Read her story at this link below.

<https://www.npr.org/2019/07/15/740459875/sculptor-augusta-savage-said-her-legacy-was-the-work-of-her-students>



Savage, *Girl with Pigtails*, 1915



Savage, *Gamin*, 1930

**Allan Freelon** (1895-1960) was an artist who painted in the impressionistic style. A teacher, Freelon spent his entire career in the Philadelphia school system; he was the first African American art supervisor for elementary and secondary education. Painting in the era of “The New Negro”, Freelon was encouraged to embrace African themes. Freelon disagreed, defending an artist’s right to freedom of expression.



Freelon, *Harbor*, c. 1940



Freelon, *Baiting Trawls*, c. 1930-1935

**Beauford Delaney** (1901-1979) was an American Harlem Renaissance painter known for his colorful Modernist compositions and distinctive approach to figuration. As a gay black artist, Delaney remained relatively isolated during his years in New York. At age 52, he followed a number of other black artists and writers to Paris, where he could find greater freedom of expression. His mental health deteriorated later in his life, fueled in part by heavy drinking and continuing poverty. The African American writer, James Baldwin, marveled over Delaney's ability to emulate such light in his work despite the darkness he was surrounded by for the majority of his life. At the time of his death, Delaney was a relative unknown. An article written in 2020, more than 40 years after his death, stated that Delaney “is finally ascending”.



Delaney, *Can Fire in the Park*, 1946



Delaney, *Jazz Quartet*, 1946

**William H. Johnson** (1901-1970) produced hundreds of works in a virtuosic, eclectic career that spanned several decades as well as several continents. Of Johnson, the Smithsonian Museum of American Art says, “By almost any standard, [Johnson] can be considered a major American artist. He. It was not until very recently, however, that his work began to receive the attention it deserves.”

Born to a poor Florence, SC family, Johnson moved to NYC where he was able to earn enough to attend the National Academy of Design. He moved to Paris in the late 1920s, where he met and married the Danish artist, Holcha Krake. The couple spent most of the 1930’s in Scandinavia, where Johnson’s interest in primitivism and folk art began to have a noticeable impact on his work. Following his wife’s death in 1944, Johnson’s physical and mental health declined dramatically. In a tragic and drawn-out conclusion to a life of immense creativity, Johnson spent his last twenty-three years in a state hospital on Long Island. By the time of his death in 1970, he had slipped into obscurity. After his death, his entire life’s work was almost disposed of to save storage fees, but it was rescued by friends at the last moment. Over a thousand paintings by Johnson are now part of the collection of the Smithsonian Institution’s Smithsonian American Art Museum.



Johnson, *Self Portrait with a Pipe*, 1937



Three paintings from Johnson's *Fighters for Freedom* series (left to right): *Three Great Abolitionists: A. Lincoln, F. Douglass, J. Brown* (ca. 1945), *Crispus Attucks* (ca. 1945), and *Harriet Tubman* (ca. 1945)

**James A. Porter** (1905-1970) is recognized as the first African American art historian. His 1943 publication, *Modern Negro Art*, is the earliest comprehensive treatment of the contributions of artists of African descent to American art and culture. Porter graduated from Howard University and ultimately became the Chair of its Art Department, a position he held until his death. He made a number of educational trips abroad, to Europe, Cuba, Haiti, and a final trip to West Africa, which led to a series of 25 paintings with African themes.



Porter, *Still Life with Peonies*, 1949



Porter, *Dismounted Spirit*, 1959

**Charles Henry Alston** (1907-1977) was an influential painter during the Harlem Renaissance and the first African American supervisor for the Works Progress Administration. He supervised the WPA murals created at Harlem Hospital, leading a staff of 35 artists and assistants. Alston was also the first African American to teach at both the Museum of Modern Art and the Art Students League and, in 1969, to have been appointed the painter member of the Art Commission of the City of New York.

The influence of Mexican muralists, José Clemente Orozco, Diego Rivera and David Alfaro Siqueiros, can be seen in Alston's work. When Diego Rivera was painting his mural at Rockefeller Center, destroyed because of its political content, Alston frequently visited him, communicating in French, their only common language. Alston's work is in the permanent collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art, and the Detroit Institute of Arts. According to Alston, "I don't believe there's such a thing as 'black art,' though there's certainly been a black experience. I've lived it. But it's also an American experience."



Alston, *Walking*, 1958



Alston, *Dancers*, 1949

**Norman Lewis** (1909-1979) was an important member of the Abstract Expressionism movement. He recognized that he wanted to be an artist from the age of nine. He began to experiment with pure abstraction in the 1940s. The prestigious Willard Gallery in NYC represented Lewis and hosted his first solo exhibition in 1949. The works he exhibited highlighted his signature calligraphic line, suggestive of figural groups engaged in frenetic movement and energy. He went on to have nine solo shows within ten years at the Gallery. Nevertheless, he never achieved during his lifetime the recognition or financial success of some of his peers (Pollock, de Kooning, Rothko).

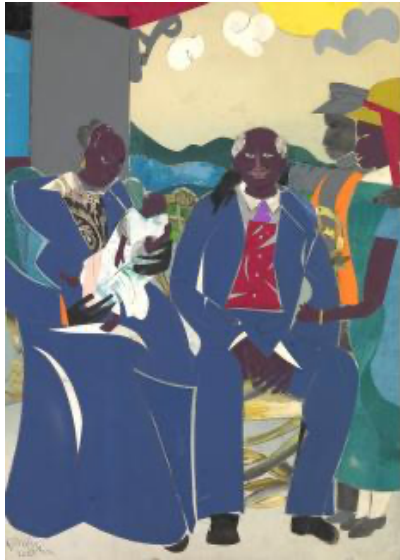


Lewis, *Florence*, 1947



Processions, such as the one in the painting above, feature prominently in Lewis' work.

**Romare Bearden** (1911-1988) is considered one of the most important American artists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. His work often depicts Black culture in a cubist style. Bearden worked in a number of media (cartooning, oils) but is best known for his photomontage compositions made from torn pages of popular magazines and assembled into powerful statements on African American life. He also wrote and illustrated a children's book, *Li'l Dan the Drummer Boy*, a story of a slave boy on a southern plantation during the Civil War, discovered and published posthumously. You can listen to the story narrated by Maya Angelou and see the illustrations at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yr8NNaHLIUA>.



Bearden, *Family*, Collage on Wood, 1986



Bearden, *The Return of Ulysses*, 1979



**Jacob Lawrence** (1917-2000) was the most widely acclaimed African American artist of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and one of only several whose works are included in standard survey books on American art. Lawrence's paintings portray the lives and struggles of African Americans, and have found wide audiences due to their abstract, colorful style and universality of subject matter. By the time he was thirty years old, Lawrence had been labeled as the "foremost Negro artist," and since that time his career was a series of accomplishments.

Lawrence is known primarily for his series of panels on the lives of important African Americans in history and scenes of African American life. His series of paintings include: *The Life of Toussaint L'Ouverture*, 1937, (forty one panels), *The Life of Frederick Douglass*, 1938, (40 panels), *The Life of Harriet Tubman*, 1939, (31 panels), *The Migration of the Negro*, 1940-41, (60 panels), *The Life of John Brown*, 1941, (22 panels), *Harlem*, 1942, (30 panels), *War*, 1946-47, (14 panels), *The South*, 1947, (10 panels), *Hospital*, 1949-50, (11 panels), *Struggle: From the History of the American People*, 1954-56, (30 panels).

You can browse all 60 panels of the *Migration Series* (completed by Lawrence at age 23) on the Phillips Collection website at <https://lawrencemigration.phillipscollection.org/the-migration-series>



Lawrence, *The Migration Series*, Panel 18, *The Migration Gained in Momentum*, 1940-41

In early 2020, the *Struggle* series began a two year tour, beginning with the Peabody Museum in Essex, MA and including the Metropolitan Museum in NYC, the Seattle Art Museum (March 5-May 23, 2021) and ending at the Phillips Collection in Washington, DC. The exhibit reunited the multi-paneled work for the first time in more than half a century. The panels were last exhibited together in 1958. Unable to find a buyer, the panels were sold piecemeal to assorted collectors. One of the panels was recently located in a Manhattan apartment after a visitor to the exhibition at the Met recognized the connection of her neighbors' artwork to the panels on display. However, of the 30 panels completed, four still remain missing. You can browse the panels on the Peabody Museum's website at <https://www.pem.org/jacob-lawrence-the-american-struggle-panels>



Lawrence, *Patrick Henry, 1775*, Panel 1 of the *Struggle Series*, 1955

**Faith Ringgold** (1930-still active) is an American painter, writer, performance artist and mixed media sculptor. She is probably best known for her story, or narrative, quilts. She grew up in Depression era Harlem where she was surrounded by an arts scene. When no one would publish her autobiography, she turned to quilts as a way of telling her story. Her first quilt story, *Who's Afraid of Aunt Jemima?* (1983), depicts the story of Aunt Jemima as a matriarch restaurateur and fictionally revises "the most maligned black female stereotype."



The quilt below is the first in a series of five called *Women on a Bridge*. Called *Tar Beach* (1988), depicts the fantasies of its heroine and narrator, Cassie Louise Lightfoot, who, on a summer night in Harlem, flies over the George Washington Bridge. The quilt is part of the collection of the Guggenheim Museum in NYC.



The following is a link to a fascinating interview with Faith Ringgold.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cU9MpcHfwiA>

The Tar Beach quilt was turned into an illustrated book for children in 1991. The following is a link to a video in which Ringgold (at age 86) reads the book aloud.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h9RKJleFdBu>

**David Driskell** (1931-2020) is viewed as one of the world's leading authorities on African American art, authoring or co-authoring eleven books on the subject. His art works are principally in the areas of collage and mixed media. His work has been featured in eminent museums and galleries world-wide, including the Corcoran and Whitney museums. Driskell died in 2020, a victim of the coronavirus. His obituary is available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/07/obituaries/david-driskell-dead.html>

Driskell features prominently in the new HBO documentary, *Black Art: In the Absence of Light*, which takes as its point of departure the 1976 exhibition, *Two Centuries of Black American Art*, curated by Driskell. The link below is to a review of the film.

<https://news.artnet.com/art-world/hbo-doc-black-art-review-1943394>

The 1976 art work below is entitled *Homage to Romare*, as it was Romare Bearden who inspired Driskell's lifelong commitment to collage. The second collage is Driskell's 1974 *Jazz Singer (Lady of Leisure)*.



**Kerry James Marshall** (1955–still active) is a preeminent American artist, one whose work is in the permanent collections of the Smithsonian, the National Gallery of Art, the Art Institute of Chicago, the Metropolitan Museum of Art and a dozen other major American museums. His paintings can command over 2 million dollars at auction. The Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, in publicity for an exhibition of his works called Marshall “one of America’s greatest living artists”. In 2017, *Time Magazine* named him one of the world’s 100 most influential people.

Marshall has long been an inspired and imaginative chronicler of the African American experience. He is best known for his large-scale paintings featuring black figures, defiant assertions of blackness in a medium in which African Americans have long been “invisible men”.

Two of his most iconic works, pictured below, were both created in 1993.



Marshall, *Barbershop*, 1993



Marshall, *The Lost Boys*, 1993

For the September 2020 cover of *Vogue*, Marshall was invited to make a painting for the cover (as was contemporary artist, Jordan Casteel). Marshall and Casteel were given complete freedom to decide who would be on their cover, a real or imaginary person, and how that person would be portrayed. The only requirement was that they choose a dress by one of four *Vogue*-selected designers for their subject to wear. Marshall created a fictional character dressed in a white formal evening dress by Off-White. The *Vogue* cover is shown below.

