

HERETOFORE IN THE COMPENDIUM

By Phil Alexandre

One of the great pleasures of working as a dealer are those very special relationships with a few collectors that evolve and grow over many years. It was more than twenty years ago when working for Terry Dintenfass that I first met Merrill Berman. Dintenfass' gallery represented a group of mostly overlooked mid-twentieth century American social realists that had grown out of Edith Halpert's Downtown Gallery and Herman Barron's ACA Galleries. Merrill would visit periodically and look at these paintings. He would look deliberately and intensely. We usually saw him on Saturdays after finishing the week at his securities investment firm.

Later, after Terry closed her 57th Street gallery, we established ourselves and remained active with some of these artists—and with Merrill. It was then that we began to learn the full depth and range of his collecting, particularly his now legendary collection of early 20th century Bauhaus, Constructivist and Dada avant-garde art and graphic design—the type of work that was featured in the Museum of Modern Art's landmark 1990 exhibition *High and Low: Modern Art and Popular Culture* and that will be featured in this summer's New York Historical Society's *Art as Activism: Graphic Art from the Merrill C. Berman Collection* opening in late June.

Over these twenty years Merrill's interest in political and activist art gradually overflowed into acquisitions of major iconic American paintings of similar subject and time. Among those were Philip Evergood's *Street Corner*, now in the collection of the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, and Reginald Marsh's *Holy Name Mission*, acquired from the famous 1994 IBM sale and now in the late Myron Kunin's collection. This latter transaction required epic negotiations that would have collapsed many times again had it not been for the extreme tenacity and will shared equally by Berman and Kunin—the final payment came two years after the first and was somehow dependent upon the sale of a third painting. And early on there was his first Jacob Lawrence, a large *Library* tempera panel that was then along the way partially exchanged or sold for *Northbound*, now in the collection. This singular

painting from the early 1960s, which serves as Lawrence's last expression of his migration theme, but with a dramatically different tone and specific reference to events of the Civil Rights Movement, is included in our current exhibition along with equally important works by John Biggers, William H. Johnson and Horace Pippin.

We thank John Yau, Peter Nesbett and Robert Cozzolino for each writing wonderful and thoughtfully fresh articles on Johnson, Lawrence and Pippin. Yau looks at the brilliant modernist leap taken by Johnson in his work during the final few productive years of his life. Nesbett challenges established scholarship by digging deeper into the specific social and political events related to Lawrence's *Northbound* and other work from the 1960s. And Cozzolino addresses the smart sophistication and self-awareness in Pippin's beloved painting at a time when all can examine it in a retrospective at the Brandywine Museum on view through this mid-July.

We are especially grateful to David C. Driskell for offering his personal reflections on these artists and their changing place in our mainstream culture almost forty years after the inclusion of each in his groundbreaking museum exhibition *Two Centuries of Black American Art*. Through our conversations with Dr. Driskell during the organization of this project we realized that we made a regressive mistake in naming our exhibition. Our announcement cards went out "Masterworks of African-American Art," but our catalogue was later adjusted to "Masterworks of American Art." One of the beautiful things about having children is that if one watches and listens, one can see the future. They will not make this same error, or would not even think to organize a show as we have. They will, I imagine, include works in their compendium based on beauty, importance, quality, that visual valor and our shared common humanity.

Finally, our heartfelt thanks to Merrill and Dalia Berman for the long relationship that we have enjoyed together, and for their trust and confidence. We admire them and their ongoing passion.



PHILIP EVERGOOD

Street Corner, 1936

oil on canvas mounted to board,
30 x 55 inches

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