

INTRODUCTION

By David C. Driskell, N.A.

In the second quarter of the twentieth century, there occurred among African Americans a new awakening in racial pride and self-determination that contributed to a flourishing of the arts in a number of urban communities in the North. Principal among these places was New York's Harlem, where a black renaissance in the visual and performing arts took center stage. The resulting evidence manifested itself in the work of a number of visual artists who chose to depict aspects of black life as subjects in their work. Universal themes such as family, friendship, motherhood, poverty, and self-identity as well as urban violence were often depicted. It was in this milieu that many African American visual artists working in the twentieth century found their individual voices. Principal among those artists of the period were several prominent painters of African descent whose masterworks can be seen in Merrill C. Berman's collection of American Art.

Salient among these artists, some of whom overlap in time and in visual perspective with the artists of the Harlem Renaissance, is William H. Johnson (1901–1970) who developed stylistic principles in his work that centered on what he described as the folkways of Southern black people. Farm life, religious scenes and themes celebrating black family life predominate in his paintings. Horace Pippin (1888–1946) based many of the paintings he created on the experiences of his own life. His own service in World War I, depictions of family and religious themes, portraiture and still life are often represented in Pippin's paintings. Palmer Hayden (1890–1973) studied painting in Europe and America. He, like



JOSEPH DELANEY
Harlem, NY 1934, c. 1935
watercolor on paper,
15 X 11 inches

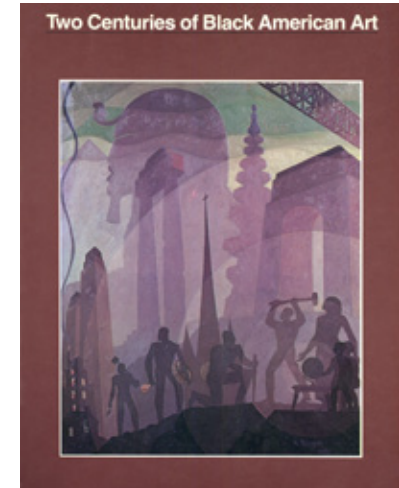
Johnson, painted a number of subjects that showed insightful views of black life in the urban North along with popular legends and myths well known in African American Southern culture. Perhaps most celebrated among the six African American artists in the Berman Collection is Jacob Lawrence (1917–2000). He is widely known in American art as the creator of several series of paintings that depict narratives of American history relating to slavery, the Great Migration of black people to the urban cities of the North and the heroes of the Haitian revolution in 1804. Joseph Delaney (1904–1991) painted aspects of the New York scene that had the flavor of a regionalist artist showing the crowded streets of the city where people gathered for fun and entertainment. He, like his fellow artist-brother, Beauford Delaney, came to New York from Knoxville, Tennessee at a time when Harlem was considered to be the cultural capital of black America. John Biggers (1924–2001) distinguished himself as an artist and teacher and is well known for a number of mural paintings that he executed at Historically Black Colleges and Universities. Subjects relating to both African and African American life became the focus of much of his work in the 1960s. Themes depicting southern black folkways served as important subject matter throughout Biggers' career. Although the works of these six artists have become popular among American art lovers and collectors today, Jacob Lawrence and Horace Pippin are the only two to date whose work has been presented in solo exhibitions in mainstream American museums.

In the second half of the twentieth century, a significant number of African American artists gained a measure of recognition for their work when several exhibitions were held that permitted the American public to see a broad

range of art created by artists of both the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Seminal among these showings was *Two Centuries of Black American Art: 1750–1950*. The exhibition opened in the fall of 1976 at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and travelled to the High Museum, the Dallas Museum and the Brooklyn Museum. Assembled for the Bicentennial year, it was a comprehensive exhibition of works by sixty-five African American artists and craftsmen, many of whose names heretofore were not found in the compendium. Even fewer were represented in major mainstream museum collections. While the names of some of these artists were well known in academic circles at Historically Black Colleges and Universities, their work was seldom cited in the standard textbooks on American art. Despite increased recognition, the work of African American artists was frequently discussed as being separate and apart from mainstream art created by American artists of European ancestry.

Throughout the history of American art, artists of African ancestry neither wanted nor willingly accepted the form of cultural isolation that was manifest in the widely held notion that African American artists created black art. Yet because of the social circumstances of the history of separation of the races over the centuries, artists of African ancestry were unwillingly made victims of an equation in art that categorically noted that they made black art. Yet, never was there the assumption that American artists of European ancestry made white art.

Enlightened writers in the discipline of art history and criticism have noted that the American art canon should be established based on quality and



Exhibition catalogue for David Driskell's *Two Centuries of Black American Art*, 1976

importance. Quality and importance should be the measure by which art is judged, and not by the race of the individual who made it. Thus, in an attempt to level the playing field in matters of cultural understanding, it should be noted that art represents our visual valor in an attempt to showcase our common humanity. It creates for us a world that brings pleasure through physical and spiritual enhancement. It is art, in its many forms of expression, in which we lay bare our hopes and dreams in search of what become our creative selves. In this regard, art should not be labeled to fit within a racial equation. When the notion of race becomes paramount in the creative process, we deny ourselves the chance to experience the richness and full knowledge of a form of art that is colorblind.

All six of the artists represented in this selection from the Berman Collection—John Biggers, Joseph Delaney, Palmer Hayden, William H. Johnson, Jacob Lawrence, Horace Pippin—were represented by one or more paintings in *Two Centuries of Black American Art*. The flavor of their work has not lessened in the years since it was exhibited then at four of the nation's leading museums.

Today, one notes an improved climate in art whereby mainstream museums and galleries show an avowed interest in a plan of diversity by collecting and presenting art by both women and minorities. Yet while noticeable progress has been made in an attempt to bring about diversity in the art world, full representation by artists of color in museum collections around the nation remains marginal at best. Nearly forty years after *Two Centuries of Black American Art* was widely hailed as a major step forward in our recognition of the diverse

aspects of American art, some of which had been overlooked for one or more centuries, in the main, we still labor under the rubric that art created by people of color remains separate and apart from the mainstream of American art.

The progress made over the past four decades in visual literacy and cultural understanding has helped to create a more inclusive climate for artists of color and their art is being integrated into mainstream culture. Museum directors, curators, galleries and collectors have played a significant role in helping to bring about change. The six artists represented in this selection from the Berman Collection are now highly sought after by collectors, and a few of them can be seen more often in mainstream museum collections. Indeed, some progress has been made in an attempt to broaden the spectrums of American culture and use art in the service of education as a form of cultural enhancement. The works of these artists bring us closer to a full understanding of seeing ourselves through an unbiased lens of a colorless humanity.

David C. Driskell is a highly regarded artist and scholar, considered by many the leading authority on the subject of African American Art. After teaching at Howard and Fisk Universities, he joined the faculty at University of Maryland in 1977. He served as Chairperson of the Department of Art from 1978–1983. In 2001 the University of Maryland established the David C. Driskell Center to honor Professor Driskell and to preserve the rich heritage of African American visual arts and culture.