

Ancestral Additions: The Legacy Grows

by

Paul Von Blum, J.D.

Senior Lecturer, African American Studies and Communication Studies
University of California, Los Angeles
pvonblum@ucla.edu

Even at the end of the first decade of the 21st century, African American art continues to struggle for mainstream legitimacy and critical recognition. Many black artists still face major barriers in obtaining venues for exhibition and substantial notice in mainstream publications and institutions about their creative efforts. African American art history, in some academic quarters, is still regarded as a quaint subfield of folklore and popular culture. Collectors of African American art are still primarily people within that community, making sales more problematic because of persistent disparities of income and wealth between African Americans and the majority population in the United States.

The overall situation, however, has improved in the post civil rights era. A growing scholarly and popular literature about the historical and contemporary tradition of African American visual art has provided critical validation for the thousands of artists whose works have made profound contributions to American art history for the past two centuries. Exhibitions of African American art are more commonplace, even in mainstream museums and galleries throughout the country. Younger black artists are finding somewhat more encouragement in art schools and other settings where their talents can be nurtured and rewarded.

This is the backdrop for the sad news of the departure in the past five years of some of the most iconic figures of contemporary African American art. These talented men and women were giants in both African American art and in American art generally. Their deaths were acknowledged briefly in the media, but their powerful significance and durable influence can scarcely be understood through modest obituary stories in the newspapers and in the electronic media.

Since 2005, these prominent African American artists have passed on, leaving a creative void that will be impossible to fill for generations: Gordon Parks (1912-2006); Mose Tolliver (c.1920-2006); Benny Andrews (1930-2006); Allen Crite (1910-2007); John Scott (1940-2007); Tina Allen (1949-2008); Roy DeCararva (1919-2009); Robert Colescott (1925-2009); Ernie Barnes (1938-2009); and most recently, Varnette Honeywood (1950-2010); Margaret Burroughs (1917-2010); and Arthur Coppedge (1938-2010). I have had the honor of teaching about the lives and works of all these women and men in my African American art courses at UCLA and in lectures and presentations in venues throughout the country and elsewhere. Even more profoundly and personally, I have come to know several of these artistic giants.

Historical legacy and simple justice require some additional words about these remarkable artists. This is necessary if only to solidify and perpetuate their memory and to augment the opportunity for younger artists and viewers to examine their cumulative works. To note that all these gifted artists deserve critical enshrinement is a profound understatement.

Gordon Parks was one of the greatest (and rarest) renaissance persons in American history. Documentary photographer, filmmaker, novelist, poet, memoirist, activist, and musician, Parks's multifaceted accomplishments rival those of Paul Robeson for sheer breadth and brilliance. He is probably best remembered as one of the finest documentary photographers of the African American experience in the 20th century—and one of the finest documentary photographers in the entire history of the medium generally. His gripping images of Jim Crow era racism and urban poverty complement his dignified portraits of African American luminaries like Muhammad Ali, Malcolm X, and many others.

Mose Tolliver was one of the most acclaimed self-taught folk artists in the African American tradition. His colorful portraits (usually with house paint on plywood) of people, nature, and animals reflected his life experiences growing up as the child of poor black Southern sharecropper, making his living doing odd jobs and as an unskilled laborer, and surviving with severe physical disabilities. Over the years, his works achieved tremendous recognition and he was represented in major exhibitions at the American Folk Art Museum, the Smithsonian Institution, the High Museum, the Corcoran Gallery, and elsewhere. Outside the art world mainstream, Tolliver nevertheless added visual depth to the comprehensive tradition of African American art history.

Benny Andrews was one of the master figurative artists in the modern era. A painter and printmaker, he was also an exemplary educator, arts administrator, and activist. His artworks centered on the black experience, but his range transcended his own African American racial background. A consummate figure in the larger tradition of socially conscious art, he used his talents to call attention to the victims of American Indian forced migrations, the Nazi Holocaust, the Vietnam War, and Hurricane Katrina. He was also a relentless advocate for the inclusion of women and minority artists into major exhibition venues and public collections.

Allen Crite, a longtime resident of Boston, was known more widely on the East Coast during his prolific visual arts career. His paintings and drawings of black neighborhood life captured the daily exuberance and travails of ordinary African Americans. These were genuine images of dignity, a thoughtful and effective repudiation of the repulsive stereotypes of blacks that have dominated American popular visual culture for centuries. His religiously themed artworks and his depictions exploring the black spiritual tradition highlighted the close linkages of African American life and religion.

Fresco Vendors, by Allen Crite



John Scott, an artist whose life and work made him inextricably identified with New Orleans, was a sculptor and printmaker whose colorful kinetic artworks propelled him to high visibility well beyond African American art circles, including the prestigious “genius” award from the MacArthur Foundation. Drawing on New Orleans’s rich and vibrant African American musical and dance heritage, Scott’s words reflected the “jazz thinking” that informed his creativity throughout his career. Highly prolific, he was forced to flee New Orleans just before the Hurricane Katrina disaster. A longtime teacher at historically black Xavier University, Scott augmented his artistic production with educational service to his community.

Tina Allen added extraordinary stature to the long tradition of African American figurative sculpture in a career cut tragically short at 59. She spent decades devoted to bringing key figures of African American history, politics, and culture to large public audiences through her skillfully crafted three-dimensional public works. From famous people like Sojourner Truth, Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, Frederick Douglass, A. Phillip Randolph, and Alex Haley to generic figures highlighting the dignity of black women and men, Allen’s sculptures were at bottom deeply educational in design and impact.



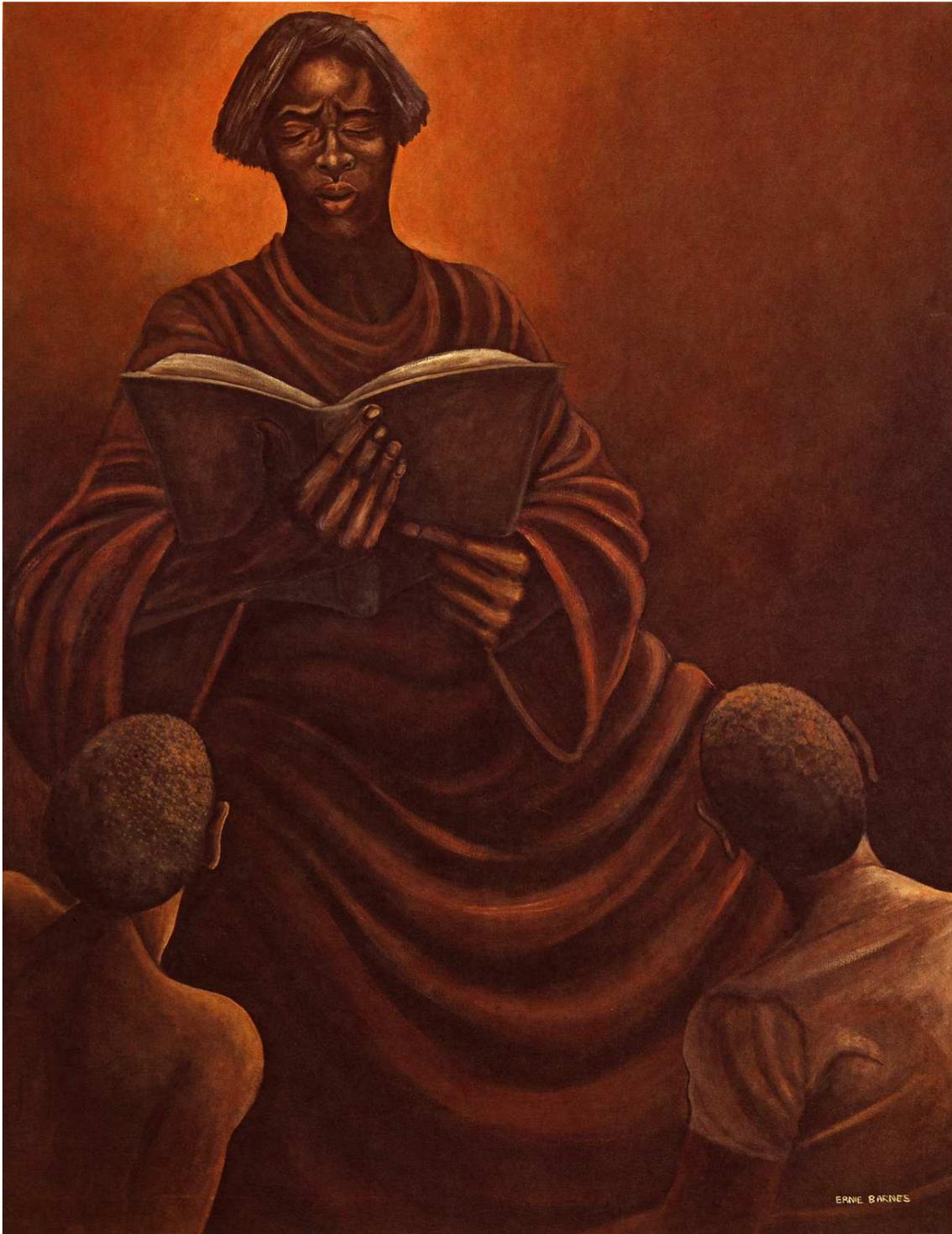
A. Philip Randolph, by Tina Allen

Roy DeCarava, like Gordon Parks, was one of the stellar figures of modern photography. He is best known for his portraits of the people of his native Harlem,. Some of his most engaging images are included in the book *The Sweet Flypaper of Life*, a collaboration with poet Langston Hughes, who provided the volume's text. DeCarava is also celebrated for his striking photographs of the giant figures of African American jazz musicians. With his skillful and original use of dark printing, his efforts moved beyond the conventions of photojournalism into the realm of photographically based fine art.

Robert Colescott was one of the most unique painters in the recent history of African American art. His works reflect trenchant social commentary, using cartoon-like characters that lampoon American racial and sexual stereotypes. His lurid colors and garish characters cause discomfort among audiences of all racial and ethnic backgrounds, causing them to reflect seriously about American contradictions owing to its troubled racial history. His most famous work, "George Washington Carver Crossing the Delaware: Page From an American History Textbook," is considered one of the modern masterpieces of visual satire.

Ernie Barnes moved from a successful career in the National Football League to the stature as one of most accomplished figurative artists in recent American art history. Widely known for his painting "Sugar Shack," which was used on the 1970s "Good Times" television show television and on a 1976 Marvin Gaye record album, Barnes was a prolific artist of the African American experience. Among other themes, Ernie Barnes addressed the need for African American educational achievement and the growing problem of incarceration rates, especially among younger black men. Less well known, Barnes also executed several paintings revealing his affection for the Jewish community, reflecting his earlier residence in the Jewish Fairfax district of Los Angeles.

The Story Teller, by Ernie Barnes



"THE STORY TELLER" © 1972 permission of Ernie Barnes Family Trust

Margaret Burroughs had a justifiable reputation as a legend both in Chicago and throughout the United States. A poet, social activist, educator, visual artist, and arts organizer, she was most well known for founding the DuSable Museum of African American history, one of the venerable African American institutions of history and culture in the nation. Her engaging sculptures, paintings, and prints focused predominantly on her own African American culture. Burroughs's record over the decades led to numerous prestigious awards and honors, making her one of the most accomplished African American women in cultural affairs in the past century.

Varnette Honeywood spent her artistic career celebrating the vibrancy of black life and culture despite the barriers of racism that she and others encountered. Her works combined strong composition, striking color, and significant historical content. She depicted the multiple delights of food, music, dance, and human conviviality in her paintings, prints, and collages. Like many African American artists, she traveled to Africa, encouraging her to view that continent as the source of diasporic identity, pride, and creativity. Her artworks also graced the Cosby show and she was one of the key illustrators for Bill Cosby's acclaimed "Little Bill" book series.

Arthur Coppedge was an educator and artist most widely known in New York and throughout the East Coast. His paintings and prints were widely exhibited, including in such prestigious venues as the Corcoran Gallery of Art, the Fogg Museum at Harvard, the Brooklyn Museum (where he also taught), the Studio Museum of Harlem, and the High Museum. His paintings and drawings focused on people and places, especially street scenes near his Brooklyn home. His portraits reveal a strong psychological acuity, revealing the power of visual art to provide unique insights into the human condition.

All these artists were exemplary members of the burgeoning tradition of African American art history. Yet mention of their passings within the past five years is entirely arbitrary. An even greater number of luminaries from that tradition have passed from the scene in the new century. That more extensive list is a veritable who's who of late 20th and early 21st century American art: Jacob Lawrence (died 2000); William Tolliver (died 2000); Roland Charles (died 2000); John Biggers (died 2001); Walt Walker (died 2002); John Riddle (died 2002); Ruth Waddy (died 2003); Skunder Boghossian (died 2003); Tom Feelings (died 2003); Vernon Smith (died 2003); Marvin Smith (died 2003); Noah Purifoy (died 2004); Jeff Donaldson (died 2004); Emilio Cruz (died 2004); Raymond Lark (died 2004); and Gwendolyn Knight (died 2005).

Scholars who write and teach about African American art are extremely familiar with the major and recurring themes in that tradition: slavery and civil rights; African American religion and spirituality; musical heritage; the role and significance of black women; the dignified representation of African Americans, especially to counter racist imagery in American visual culture; the significance of Africa as the source of racial pride and heritage; and many more. Perhaps among the most significant themes is the enormous value of ancestral memory. For several black artists, the theme of ancestry is a crucial component of their work, a profound recognition that the men and women who have passed on are vital sources for continuing the achievements and struggles of people of African descent.

Even a modest familiarity with contemporary African American art reveals this focus on ancestry and legacy. Literally scores of black artists understand that knowledge of the past—and the sacrifice of those who came before—is crucial in addressing the challenges of the present and future. This principle is as applicable in the arts as in any other field of endeavor. Artists like Betye Saar, Pat Ward William, Mark Greenfield, Whitfield Lovell, Renee Stout, and scores of other have used their considerable talents to offer their audiences a sensitive glimpse into their African American predecessors.

Younger black artists, even including those now in elementary through high schools through the country, need to know and appreciate the contributions of their distinguished predecessors. Even mature artists who have achieved high levels of critical recognition and visibility owe much of their successes to those who labored before them. As we move to the second decade of the new century, it is time to take pause to remember and honor those remarkably talented African American visual artists whose lives have recently ended but whose legacies will endure for decades to come.