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FOUR PROBLEMS IN THE HISTORY OF NEGRO ART¹

Modern art criticism has taught us not to ignore our immediate personal feelings in the presence of a work of art; but equally with this lesson it has also taught us that art is not produced *in vacuo*, that is, independently of both society and history. In other words, criticism forbids us to tyrannize the arts with *a priori* judgments or to harass them with the vagaries of sense perception to the detriment of receptivity and reflection. Further, it obligates us to consider all the products of art no matter how mean-appearing and to weigh and assess these with intelligent powers of illumination and appreciation. This, in fact, may be regarded as the special contribution of humanistic and scientific studies to the fields of aesthetics and art history. They have laid upon the student not only the necessity for understanding but also for interpreting the arts.

In very recent years, the obligation to look at American art from this enriched point of view has been assumed by several writers. Yet, the Negro phase of American art has benefited hardly at all by the shift from purely national or patriotic objects to those of a more liberal order. Indeed, that part of it antedating the period 1900-1920 has been passed over with singularly sparse notice from any but race writers. It would seem that the opprobrium attaching to slavery has been transferred to the documentation and to the monuments of Negro-made arts and crafts of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth centuries.²

It will require, therefore, some little effort to correct this attitude,—something beyond mere summary and un-

¹ An address delivered in Columbus, Ohio, on November 1, 1941, on the occasion of the Annual Meeting of the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History.

² The first systematic account of significant productions by early Negro artists was published by the writer in *Art in American* . . . XXIV (January, 1936), 16.

methodical opinion, however sensitive, and beyond mere annotated lists of pictures, however tastefully bound. In short, it will require an effort that will reconnect Negro production with its proper social sources and with the known artistic periods and levels of expression coloring American art from its beginning until today.

As we recognize that Negro art is both historically and presently in a state of disorientation with respect to the remainder of American art we become aware that important problems are couched in this relationship; and it becomes my task to present four of the basic problems involved in a systematic approach to the history and criticism of American Negro art.³ It is hoped that the treatments offered herein will also have valuable implications for the Negro in European and in Latin American art.

EVIDENCES OF HANDICRAFTS AND OF FINE ART

The first problem concerns the reality of handicrafts and fine art by Negroes in America prior to 1820. It is a problem, the ultimate solution of which must depend on patient research and competent criticism; for the productions of slave labor in all respects were bound up with the enforced anonymity of the slave.

For obvious reasons, recognition was customarily denied the creative efforts of Negroes whether slave or free and the credit for the success of their efforts taken by their masters or by their white intermediaries. This was the general practice, and students of this field are dependent, in great part, for evidence of slave ingenuity and artistic success on the exceptions thereto. By this I mean the published statements of masters or of other interested persons

³ Neglect of the production of the early Negro in the Fine Arts can be gauged by the silence of so many white historians treating early cultural expressions in the United States. Whereas, studies of the Negro spiritual and the Negro folksong are plentiful, research has done very little to provide the student of culture with materials for criticism of folk and craft arts of the early Negro American.

referring to a slave's remarkable talent or still other clandestine references to slave abilities occurring in the literature of the time; as, for example, advertisements for runaway slaves.⁴

The extant examples or monuments, if I may so call them, of slave handicrafts and fine art before 1820 are to my knowledge few but singular. It is, nevertheless, reasonable to suppose from what is known of the diversity and wide employment of Negro labor in skilled productive capacity during the Eighteenth and Nineteenth centuries that their output must actually have reached important proportions before the middle of the Eighteenth century. This conjecture is supported, indeed occasioned, by the numerous instances in early records of Negroes who were apprenticed or independently employed in the trades of coach and sign painting, silversmithing, printing, ironsmithing, cabinetmaking,—all trades which were the indirect roads to the greater highway of the Fine arts as has been demonstrated repeatedly in the history of native American painting and sculpture.⁵

There is therefore reason to presume that there were many more Negro practitioners in the arts of portrait painting and engraving, for example, and in the crafts of ironsmithing and sign painting than written records attest. Negroes were commonly inducted into these skills by way of the apprenticeship system, even though their being so placed was usually owing to protective or paternalistic or forcible motives.⁶

In the North, the employment of the Negro at trades

⁴ W. D. Johnston, *Slavery in Rhode Island, 1775-1776*. (Providence: Printed for the Society, 1894), 135.

⁵ Vid. Alan Burroughs, *Limners and Likenesses. Three Centuries of American Painting*. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1936). 77, 97 *et passim*.

⁶ R. B. Pinchbeck, *The Virginia Negro Artisan and Tradesman*. (Richmond, Va.: William Byrd Press, Inc., 1926), 20-23. See also G. W. Dow, *The Arts and Crafts in New England, 1704-1775*. (Topsfield, Mass.: The Wayside Press, 1927), 3.

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requiring exceptional knowledge and skill was not so rare as the scarcity of allusions to the fact would lead us to surmise. Naturally, the incidence of such employment is generally indicative of Negroes exceptionally placed and favored. Their occasional equality with trades masters who themselves were products of the apprenticeship system was also contingent upon manumission or at least purchased freedom; for it was some such status that permitted them to set up as free competitors in different localities.⁷ Despite these limitations, documentary proof adduces recognized Negro participation in the following skilled trades or crafts in Northern communities: in New England, skilled wood-block engraving for books and newspapers, type-designing; portrait painting in oils⁸ and engraving on steel; landscape painting and the making of samplers and other kinds of embroidery; rug-weaving and pottery-making and painting on glass.⁹

In the South, skillful employments of Negro slave artisans and ward apprentices were even more diversified possibly because of the greater numbers of both slave and free blacks and also because of the lucrative business of selling valuable mechanics and artisans for plantation or in-town chores.¹⁰ Pinchbeck tells us that to this day in Virginia there are still standing several old houses built by ante bellum slave labor that bear testimony not only to the resourcefulness of the plantation slave but also to his remarkable skill as ironsmith, mill-wright and cabinetmaker.

⁷ Isaiah Thomas in *The History of Printing in the U. S. I* (Worcester, Mass.: 1810), 294, provides us with an interesting case. It concerns a Negro slave who cut on wooden blocks all the designs used by his master to decorate ballads, small books for children or any other printed material requiring the same. This very slave taught his own sons all that he knew of typesetting and wood-block cutting. His sons utilized their knowledge in the service of his master's sons who inherited the business of Thomas Fleet.

⁸ G. F. Dow, *op. cit.*, 6.

⁹ Phillis Wheatley, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*. (London: Printed for A. Bell, Bookseller, Aldgate, 1773), 101.

¹⁰ Pinchbeck, *op. cit.*, 29.

The more common phases of crafts skill attributed to the Negro artisan in the South were as follows: Ironsmithing of utilitarian and ornamental varieties, tool and cabinet making, including domestic utensils; coach and sign painting, house construction; gold, silver, brass and copper-smithing and metal casting;¹¹ harness-making, embroidery; gardening and weaving.

When we remember that many owners of slaves sought to make their plantations independent of free labor or competitive white labor then we are at once struck with the realization that this effort doubtless entailed the induction of thousands of Negro slaves into the skilled trades; for certainly the acquisition of the required technics could not have been left entirely to the native intelligence and motor aptitudes of the Negro.¹²

It is no news to any of us now that this is precisely what happened since it is recorded for any of us to see in the state, county, and parish records, in the journals of early travellers as well as stay-at-home observers, and in the newspapers and private letters of the day. Peterson states in his *History of Rhode Island* that Gilbert Stuart, the celebrated painter of more than eighty portraits of George Washington, first learned to sketch from watching a slave make portraits in black chalk on the heads of casks. It is from such casual statements that the story of early Negro artistry is gleaned.

Probably the most outstanding instance of decorative skill emanating from the hands of bondsmen, and, for that matter, the most nearly native expression in the range of handicrafts to be found in the Southern United States is located in the city of New Orleans, where, legend as well

¹¹ A. C. Prime, *The Arts and Crafts in Philadelphia, Maryland and South Carolina, 1721-1785: Gleanings from Newspapers*. (The Walpole Society, 1929), I, 34; II, 67, 79. See also W. E. B. DuBois, *The Negro Artisan*. (Atlanta, Ga.: Atlanta University Press, 1902), 17-19.

¹² Charles H. Wesley, *Negro Labor in the United States, 1850-1925*. (New York: Vanguard Press, 1927), 14-24.

as archaeological testimony has it, the greater part of the wrought iron extant in *Le Vieux Carré* originated in foundries completely manned by Negro slaves. It is the inability of experts to trace many examples of this iron to any other than local sources that has been the final test of this tradition. The slaves themselves are of course unnamed to history. But here, if anywhere, can be described the ability of the condemned slave to rise above his condition and to show that his heart though burdened could still sing.¹³ For sheer inventiveness and skilful application of ornamental design to functional use, the grilles and balconies of *Le Vieux Carré* are a deight to the eye.¹⁴

I have said that the extant examples of Colonial Negro craftsmanship are few but singular. Altogether there are

¹³ An article signed H. B. L. "The Negro's Art Lives in His Wrought Iron." (*New York Times Sunday Magazine* (August 8, 1926). See also Sonn, Albert, *Early American Wrought Iron*. (New York: Scribner's, 1928), III, 234, and Werlein, Philip, Mrs., *The Wrought Iron Railings of Le Vieux Carré*. (New Orleans: by Mrs. Philip Werlein, 1925), n.p.

¹⁴ The early wrought iron balconies and railings that decorate residences and public buildings of the Vieux Carré and adjacent neighborhoods in New Orleans are of disputed origin. By some writers they are claimed as the commissioned work of German tradesmen; by others they are regarded as the work of white artisans of French or Spanish extraction, or both. Still others say that this decorative iron is undoubtedly the production of Negro blacksmiths of two different groups: They were recruited, say the protagonists of this theory, from Santo Domingo, following the native uprising in that island and from the enslaved African population of the great Louisiana plantations. The West Indian Negroes brought this skill as smiths with them, it is believed; but their African brothers who preceded them to these shores are credited with a tradition in the manipulation of iron. There are more partisans of the latter view; it cannot be said, however, that history and local tradition wholly support any one of these claims. My study of the hand-wrought iron itself would incline me to accept the general view that most of it was made in New Orleans or adjacent environs; for there are some curious departures from the European patterns that inspired it which could only be explained by the intermediary of local manufacture.

For additional information consult the *Historical Sketch Book and Guide to New Orleans and Environs*. Edited and compiled by several of the leading writers of the New Orleans Press. (New York: Will H. Coleman, 1885), 9-11; Geerlings, G. K., *Wrought Iron in Architecture*. (New York and London: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1929), 91; and Werlein, Philip (Mrs.), *op. cit.*

about fifteen portraits of naive and so-called primitive type, four steel engravings, an unnumbered series of buildings and parts of buildings in several colonial styles in which much of the original trim and finish is preserved,¹⁵ a few unattributed articles of furniture such as tables and chairs, and, of course, such pieces of ornamental ironwork as Sonn, Koch, Werlein and others have been able to assign to the local foundries of New Orleans.

If the problem has been to determine whether or not the assumed employment of the early Negro in the artistic or refined crafts has any basis in reality I believe that the foregoing alignment has settled it once and for all. It is the inescapable task of the trained Negro scholar, nonetheless, to help recover through unimpeachable identification more examples of Colonial and post-Colonial productions by Negroes in these several fields. The written sources must not therefore be slighted or ignored, since they may serve as clues to that which we are seeking. We need to find the earliest cultural proofs of the Negro's struggle to adapt himself to the imposed mores and mechanisms of Western civilization through his creative powers. Such evidences of acculturation are indeed what our study of American Negro history would lead us to expect.

It is only in very recent years that white America has made inventory of comparable materials to which such labels as "American folk art," "popular art," "primitive American art" have been assigned. It behooves the Negro to find out to what precise and creditable extent his forbears deserve recognition within these interesting classes of production.

THE NEGRO ARTIST AND RACIAL SUBJECT MATTER

There is a second problem in the history of American Negro art. It arises in the question "At what point does

¹⁵ Vid. Article by Malcom Parks in the *New York Sun*. "1712 Manor House in Walkill Valley is Tribute to Workmanship of Slaves." (July 23, 1938.)

racial interest take vital hold on the Negro artist?" This question is of crucial importance because it adheres to the very core of all discussion of the Negro's part in American culture. Its stubborn recurrence in the fields of literature, music and art only shows how perfectly our social and political position can be mirrored in our thought and modes of formal expression. By way of recapitulation I can say that stout arguments have been produced on both sides of this issue of racism as a modality of cultural expression; but as yet, no sufficient *critique* of its claim with reference to the formative arts of the American Negro has appeared. It is my hope that the following historical treatment may serve as a contribution towards that desideratum.

At the outset, I would like to state that we cannot hope to understand in any clear sense the Negro artist's relation to the main stream of American culture if we assess his production strictly on the basis of racial traits and race themes. Incidentally, these are the twin devils which assail the peace of the artist as well as the art teacher and perhaps the latter more so than the former, inasmuch as the teacher must be watchful towards such dialectical subtleties, whereas the artist, according to his lights, can ignore them.

The injection of race propaganda for one reason or another into the sphere of art is something more real, however, than a dialectical subtlety of race determinism; for it has been shown by the history of the practice in America that it has its roots in race discrimination, cultural disfranchisement and the prostitution of science to motives of race subjugation.¹⁶

By a characteristic gesture of hocus pocus the defenders of this side of the issue translate racial traits into original-

¹⁶ Vid. Hirschfield, Magnus, *Racism*. (Edwin and Cedar, Paul, tr. & Ed.) London: Victor Gollanes, 1938, pp. 175-189; and Boas, Franz, *Race, Language and Culture*. (New York: Macmillan, 1940), 40, 102, 311, also Herskovits, M. J., *Acculturation, the Study of Culture Contact*. (New York: J. J. Augustin, 1938), 1-32 *et passim*.

ity of approach and manner.¹⁷ Let us see if this measuring stick will enable us to accept their strictures upon the Negro artists of the last century for the lack of racial traits or originality in their work. Certain critics have deplored that sparseness of race illustration and racial idiom, whatever that may be, in the work of all Negro artists prior to the so-called New Negro Movement in the early 1920's. They assert that instead of giving the world these "essentials" Negro artists have given us conventional works too closely resembling the work of their white contemporaries.¹⁸ These very critics ignore at the same time the excellent portraits of early Negroes, some of them great race leaders, which were faithfully and honestly executed by Patrick Reason and William Simpson. They ignore the numerous illustrations of anti-slavery literature delineating the plight of the slave done by Patrick Reason. They ignore, further, the splendid portraits in marble and in plaster by Edmonia Lewis, Meta Warrick Fuller and May Howard Jackson and the straightforward portraits by Harleston, none of which apparently betrays any self-conscious concern with racial tincture.

It is obvious that these works are only matters of content so far as their immediate texts are concerned. How do racial traits then particularize the racial theme? What signs betray the presence of biological and psychological traits indicating race in art?

The answer to these questions can be simply put. Racial differences in art depend on geographic and social differences of a pronounced order. But the crude realities of the Negro's disadvantaged position in antebellum days were not apt to cause the traits of an isolated culture to

¹⁷ Alain Locke, *The Negro in Art*. (Washington, D. C.: The Associates in Negro Folk Education, 1940), 8-10.

¹⁸ A letter written by Edmonia Lewis to Maria W. Chapman bears very strikingly on this point. It shows an implied concern with propaganda, but not of the peculiarly esoteric variety advocated by the "racialists."

appear in his productions.¹⁹ Moreover, it is a notable fact that scientific analysis of Negro folk music in America has discovered no qualities that can be specifically ascribed to the genetic inheritance of the Negro but only to certain cultural peculiarities that migrated to America with him—peculiarities that are found not only in Africa but in the Orient and are common property of the most physiologically diverse peoples.²⁰ Racial or group preferences are not necessarily the best indexes of cultural survival.

It is quite as impossible to discover specifically racial traits in recent Negro art as it also is to find the same in the Negro spiritual. Research only reveals to us how much all peoples who have lived close to Nature and who have responded creatively to the powerful sensations that she communicates to the intelligence, have in common in their arts. In comparable expressive ways they sublimate and conserve the yearning for freedom from oppression. Certain racial groups may be credited with the origination of specific folk concepts, folk tales and technics; but these cannot be set down as "traits" since they are the phenomena of culture, which being dynamic are ever-changing and therefore dissimilar rather than resembling in their causes.²¹

The true significance of early Negro art is to be found in the evidence it gives of the cultural striving and the titanic effort to prove oneself worthy of the benefits of civili-

¹⁹ M. J. Herskovits, *op. cit.*

²⁰ As H. E. Krehbiel has proved with regard to the folk music of the Negro: that in so far as certain dominant as well as modal preferences of Negro music are present in the productions of other racial groups with which he has no culture contact, more general causes than race are thereby implied. *Vid.* Krehbiel, H. E., *Afro-American Folksongs*. (New York: G. Schirmer, 1914), 11-111.

²¹ Boas, *op. cit.*, 263; moreover, since this question very likely will be resolved on the basis of enlightened education supported by ordinary logic one may point to the art productions of various African tribal cultures and ask why they are so different in formal aspect, although directed in most cases to the same ends. Here again, content would seem to have triumphed over the idiosyncratic demands of the so-called "original" artist.

zation which composed the trend of Negro life throughout the Nineteenth century. We can no more discount the double motive of grasping for freedom and for education and social integration on the Negro's part than we can discount the white man's frantic impulse to extend popular government and at the same time to declare the Indian an alien in his own land.

On the other hand, I do admit the working of certain cultural gifts which the Negro brought with him to these shores. The Negro spirituals, worksongs, folksongs and dances do conserve them. Yet, these gifts could not have been the dominant influence in the working out of the patterns of expression; for they were rapidly superseded by new geographic, economic and social conditions: So that the test of originality in early Negro art is not one of racial idiosyncrasy but of dominant social temper.²²

On the level of the handicrafts the prevailing dynamic elements are of course fitness for use and the artistic efficiency of the creating agency. Unfortunately, we have no materials on this level except the iron-work of New Orleans previously mentioned and other examples of tectonic expression such as houses and furniture. Early Negro folk-expression in our special field has been greatly depleted and obscured by the action of time, by purposeful neglect and deliberate misrepresentation. Yet, I would venture to surmise that if more of it were extant it would necessarily resemble in form if not altogether in content the various classes of skilled crafts work to which a retrospecting America now makes proud claim.

Turning to the portraits, figure studies, landscapes, marines and plastic work of mid-century we observe that the

²² Among early commentators on the Negro's part in the cultural progress of America there is a striking unanimity of opinion with regard to the black man's strong sense of interaction with his social environment. Writers who have touched on the careers of various Negro artists and adhere to this opinion are Martin R. Delaney, Moncure D. Conway, H. T. Tuckerman and William D. Howells.

Negro's response to the social temper found expression in quite idealistic terms. Like his white contemporaries the early Negro artist was groping. He was learning not only to see, but also to put his conceptions into new media. At the same time he was believing in the depths of his soul that his duty was to yield as clear and as apt an interpretation of his impressions as his powers could summon from the materials with which he had to work.

To the Negro public, such as there was at that time, these imaged aspects of reality had the ring of novelty as well as truth. To the majority of white men—even whites of the aristocratic stamp and mould—the arts of painting and sculpture were, in their intrinsic objects, confused with ethics, politics and manners. Their was among the higher bourgeoisie, composed of glorified tradesmen and successful merchants, planters and industrialists, a cult of personality, born, perhaps, of revolutionary heroism, but nurtured on English and French notions of patrician dignity and security and treated in art as the image of physical detachment and psychical distance.²³ This was a time when American taste was given to rhetorical flourishes in conversation, a genteel adherence to punctilio in official as well as private intercourse, to emphatic solemnity in religious worship and to a plebeian type of ritual in small-town political meetings.²⁴ In a word we can account for the prevalence of portraits, family groups, genre and historical studies of true American vintage on the basis of currents or tides of popular movement, of which the ideals were manifest in such classes of pictorialism as I have named.

Add to this the further important fact that white artists of radical inclinations were portraying race leaders and

²³ *Vid.* Frances M. Trollope, *Domestic Manners of the American* (Reprinted, New York: Howard and Wilford Bell, 1904), 311.

²⁴ For additional proof of these statements the reader need only consult the portraits of Gilbert Stuart, Chester Harding, Thomas Sully, J. W. Jarvis, Rembrandt Peale and others and the compositions of W. S. Mount, Caleb Bingham and John Krimmel.

even the lowly inconsequential slave in a manner entirely sympathetic and free of deception or condescension. Under some of these artists the Negro artists whom I have mentioned received their training. It is obvious, therefore, that they could not ignore all these sights, gratuitously presented to their eyes, without coming to the now apparent decision that their destiny would become interwoven with the implied causes thereof. For this reason the Negro artist did not, in fact, could not fly in the face of conventions which were acceptably the whole manner and mark of distinction of the leading American families when this country was still in her frontier days. On the contrary, he proved himself an astute psychologist by introducing racial as well as non-racial themes on the very level then considered representative by the leading native patrons of art. We must not forget that the Negro had nowhere else to turn for good models of social conduct. In that day, manners paraded as ideals.

I hope that I have succeeded in making clear that the question of originality takes its rise in matters of content; and that poverty of content, where race themes are concerned, cannot be charged against the work of the early Negro artists who found their materials among the leaders of the Anti-slavery movement and among those subjects dictated by an active though somewhat philistine social temper, modified by a strong religious sense.

THE DECLINE OF CREATIVE POWER AFTER 1870

The third problem in this field concerns the decline in productivity among the Negro artists after 1870. This date is selected because it associates well with the underlying economic causes which, in their turn, originated in the disrupting influence of the Civil war, the issue of which, having been delayed for four years, threw the Negro artist off his accustomed creative stride. This apparent decline or depression, if you will, continued until the 1890's when an

artist like Henry O. Tanner, having advantages of better training and an improved standard of living, could begin to probe deeper into the question of the relationships of art to society and religion.

What then, someone may ask, will you say of the Centennial celebration of 1876, when for the first time the Negro artist was given national recognition through the reception of his exhibits at the Fair?²⁵ I should reply that this date and this occasion mark the culmination rather than the beginning of an era. It is a date favoring a retrospective rather than a prospective appraisal of the artists to whom we refer. We should note that the remarkable professional careers of Edmonia Lewis and Edwin M. Bannister had reached by this time the climax of their development. After this time, they would only repeat their performances and leave discovery and novel experimentation to the succeeding generation.

But I offer the not uninteresting analogy of their part as delegates at large to the national congress of the arts at Philadelphia in 1876 and that of the black electorate which at the same time had representatives in both state and national legislatures. Bannister and Edmonia Lewis symbolized the cultural franchise and the new citizenship, if you will, in the Republic of American art.

Perhaps it was too much to expect that a handful of artists, lacking a real audience among their own people could stir or shame the national conscience or turn back the tide of reaction by exerting some powerful and thitherto unknown charm over the minds of Americans of any degree whatsoever. It was not their role to popularize the Negro subject; for America was not yet sufficiently discriminating to tell the silver from the dross except in matters of portraiture, as the row over Hiram Powers' *Greek Slave* has

²⁵ John Cromwell, "An art gallery and museum not in the guide book," *New National Era*, v. 37 (Oct. 1, 1874), 2; and *The Massachusetts Artists Centennial Album*. (Compiled by S. A. Osgood and Co., Boston, 1875), 4.

disclosed. Moreover, this was the time of rampant eclecticism in American art; and even aggressive individualities like those of Eakins, Homer and Ryder could not lead the national taste.

If Winslow Homer's studies of plantation Negroes could not prick the American love of subject matter to its emotional roots, then what short of the revolution in taste that did finally arrive in the 1890's could have done so? In the 1870's and 1880's the most popular aspects of painting were the fashionable portrait and the historical picture or illustration. In sculpture, the neo-classic style, long outmoded in Europe, still held the day. It is therefore of real significance that E. M. Bannister was able to strike a poetical note in his rather naturalistic transcriptions of landscape that placed him among the most original American artists in the Centennial Exposition;²⁶ though Edmonia Lewis pursued with a rather too deliberate energy the more sentimental possibilities of the neo-classic style.²⁷

There were other Negro artists who, following the Civil war, felt that their hour of planting and tilling had passed and that there only remained to gather the harvest. William Simpson, Eugene Warbourg, Patrick Reason, Nelson Primus and Robert Douglass, Jr., were, so to speak, in the post-meridian of their creative powers. We have shown that their bias of vision, though idealistic, was essentially American. When the Centennial was set forth Duncanson had been dead six years. The broad-scale events which had brought moments of passionate intensity into his and other lives were now but history. On the walls of the Nicholas Longworth mansion in Cincinnati (now the Taft house), he had painted landscapes which stand as a veritable capstone of the classico-romantic landscape as conjured up by Amer-

²⁶ Bannister's landscapes in the Museum of the Rhode Island School of Design offer sufficient evidence of this quality.

²⁷ It must not be thought, however, that her neo-classicism was superficial veneer. There exists a very fine copy of the head of "Young Augustus" to show how sound was her indoctrination.

icans. Duncanson's work completes in America the landscape tradition which had descended from Poussin and Claude Lorrain and which was first introduced in America by Thomas Cole who evidently considered it an excellent vehicle for his apocalyptic visions. More than any other of this group of artists, Duncanson's life helps to round out an era.

The period of Reconstruction brought decline to a rudimentary Negro culture just as it contained a long day of exhausting and bitter struggle for an aspiring Negro citizenship. The names of stellar personalities once regularly proclaimed in the press for their activities as artists or as people of culture were no longer to be found. Bannister lost the leadership of the Providence art set and Edmonia Lewis returned to an expatriate life in Rome. William Simpson, after 1866, began to lead a life of relatively inactive retirement, and nothing of real importance was developed by Primus, Reason or David Bustill Bowser.

Among the Negro writers who had helped to inspire thoughts of freedom among their black brothers as part of the movement to abolish slavery almost none had anything truly creative to say after 1867; and the exceptions to this rule, as witness the writings of Frances Harper, Blackson, James Madison Bell *et al* are still wavering in a cross-fire of revaluative criticism.²⁸

The last decade of the century was equally for the makers of Negro literature and the exponents of Negro art a period of reorientation to the materials of American life and of Negro life in particular. The Renascence of worthy production in these fields was not due until the 1890's with the advent of the writings of Charles W. Chesnutt, Paul Laurence Dunbar, W. E. B. DuBois and others. I believe that this parallel is both telling and correct.²⁹

²⁸ Loggins, Vernon, *The Negro Author. His Development in America.* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1931), 305-352.

²⁹ Sterling Brown, *The Negro in American Fiction.* (Wash., D. C.: Association in Negro Folk Education, 1937), 76-82; 100ff.

The Negro artists of the "Forties" and "Fifties" had lived on with their confrères the Negro writers into a transitional day of American life and art. The national spirit, which had harbored the genius of industrial democracy, was beginning to rebuild itself from the wreckage of a torn and distraught commonwealth. In the North had come almost suddenly with the war, the colossus of mechanized industry creating vast wealth and oppressing human labor. Its peculiar psyche, the pragmatic spirit, was to prepare the way for a flowering of American realism. New forces were abroad that would make the Negro toil and sweat for his bread and education before he should be able again to graft vision on experience and extract with ease the bitter-sweet poesy of lowly life. There was no Negro artist or writer able forcefully to direct the eye of social justice upon the plight of his black brother or to impale the forces of greed and selfishness which hid in the shadow of the new capitalism and fought the Negro for every foot of vantage in the reconstructed South.

It was left for the fourth generation to direct the contemplative powers of the Negro upon the new subjects and the expedient interests. Henry O. Tanner, William H. Harper, Meta Warrick Fuller were to catch and hold the torch of the new American realism as exemplified in the work of Winslow Homer, Thomas Eakins, Duveneck and Eastman Johnson.³⁰ Both Tanner and Harper were to study under men of such forthright temperament. Eakins, in fact, was to Tanner what William Dean Howells was to Paul Laurence Dunbar—a critic mentor. From him, Tanner learned to portray with earnestness the spiritual charm as well as the repellant weakness of human character.

Thus, in fifteen years the Negro artist passed from the less direct vocations of portraiture and decorative land-

³⁰ As witness, the following well-known paintings by Tanner created before 1900: "The Banjo Player," "The Artist's Mother," "Bishop Hartzell," "The Artist's Father."

scape to the broader aesthetic base of the picture-with-a-social-comment. From the pompous formalism which American art had taken over from Anglo-French idealism the Negro artist had passed to colloquial realism, a style and a point of view spun, as it were, out of the very entrails of the great American realists whom I have mentioned.

This, therefore, was a period of relatively silent groping which we can denominate as that of transition between the eras of republic and empire. In this arose our third problem; namely, that there was a period of decline in American Negro art production during and immediately following the period of Reconstruction. I have attempted to show what major factors contributed to make this period one of comparative sterility or of irrelevant production for the Negro artist. I sincerely hope that my exposition of this problem may at once receive the attention of those who task themselves with writing the history of the Negro artist's part in American life.

THE NEW NEGRO MOVEMENT AS THE ACME OF CULTURAL PROGRESS

An unbiased review of Negro art in the period 1900-1920 discloses that the so-called New Negro Movement of the middle twenties was the culmination rather than the beginning of an era of self-expression. The tendency to reserve all the eulogies and all the critical acclaim for the artist personalities of that date has *per contra* served to indict all those who have gone before. This is indeed a shortsighted position; and it can be shown through an examination of the social and economic progress of the Negro and of the content of his art prior to the middle twenties that it is grounded upon a false notion of the movements and interests of Negro artists who developed in the first two decades of this century.

No judgment of so long and complex a period of productivity can be valid that is not based on precise observation

and a thorough documentation of the works produced during the period. Fortunately, it is possible to show that what preceded the New Negro Movement was vital, and that in a cumulative way it prepared the Negro artist for more telling achievement in the third decade. It is this manifest process of unfoldment and growth that suggests to us the fact of ultimate fulfillment or true florescence in the twenties and thirties.

Around 1900, the American Negro began to evince great acquisitive interest in the sources of culture. The advent of a new century tended to stimulate his desires for increased economic and social opportunity within the country of his birth. The Negro masses in some parts of the country were still in the grip of agricultural and industrial servitude; and among the most vicious means to keep them there were the notorious peonage system, segregation and deprivation in the use of all public facilities, disfranchisement at the polls, differential appropriations for public education, *et cetera*. But in the North, the urban Negro populations were finding their way more directly into the larger life of their communities through a wide variety of occupations, including well-paid employment in industry and in small race-supported business enterprises. There, family life was more stable and the constant influx of Negro migrants from the South scarcely became menacing to the normal tenor of Northern city life until the industrial draft of the World War.³¹

The indifference of the most powerful economic groups to the cultural assimilation of the Negro persisted, in spite of apparent progress in race relations. Their indifference was clearly mirrored in the literature and art of the time. The portrayal of Negro character by white writers and artists, for example, cannot be said to have arisen from serious purposes. They saw only the comical or the fabu-

³¹ Carter G. Woodson, *A Century of Negro Migration*. (Washington, D. C.: The Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, 1918), 172ff.

lous side of the Negro; and folklorists like Thomas Nelson Page and Joel Chandler Harris early set the pattern of Negro plantation life in a proverbial ideology that more penetrating studies by latter day Negro and white writers have not been able to submerge.³²

Illustrators of the stamp of E. B. Frost and E. W. Kemble, and sometimes, Howard Pyle, succeeded unbelievably in illuminating sentimental American literature with the ludicrous postures and senile antics of *Uncle Toms*, *Aunt Chloes*, *Rastuses* and other very much over-drawn "darker" types.

This rather derogatory trend received its first setback from the declarations of critics like William Dean Howells, the recognized discoverer of Paul Laurence Dunbar. In fact, the maturity of conscious Negro art and literature would almost date from the publication of an article by Howells in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1900 in which he states that:

... In many of the arts it [the Negro race] has already shown, during a single generation of freedom, gifts which slavery apparently only obscured. With Mr. Booker T. Washington the first American orator of our time, fresh upon the time of Frederick Douglass; with Mr. Dunbar among the truest of our poets; with Mr. Tanner, a black American, among the only three Americans from whom the French government ever bought a picture, Mr. Chesnutt may well be willing to own his color.

There were other Negro painters and writers busily engaged at the inception of this period in serious production, who were probably less talented than Tanner or than Dunbar, but nevertheless important to the general movement of the period. These artists, working independently of Tanner explored other subject-matter and added to the repertory of Negro art. It is their contribution that has been ignored by those who have been fascinated by the new galaxies of the late twenties.

The first significant opportunities that came to our ar-

³² Sterling Brown, *op. cit.*, 84-98.

tists of this day for public exhibition and propagandization of their aims were those presented in the collective exhibitions of State fairs. It is true that even these occasions were over-shadowed and controlled by the more general promotive exigencies of the fairs; but they were at least occasion for the showing of Negro-made wares; and they also afforded some slender opportunity to attack the adamant indifference of the public to Negro cultural progress.

The Jamestown Exposition brought out the work of Meta Warrick Fuller, of Thomas W. Hunster, W. C. Thompson, Allen Jones, the sculptor Bertina Lee and the very competent work of Samuel O. Collins. Unfortunately, when the collection was dispersed the greater part of it disappeared permanently from public view. This was probably characteristic of art productions made for or merely displayed at State fairs. Meta Warrick's "Ethiopia Awakening," made for the New York State Centennial, is the only work of an aesthetic nature which has really survived in the shifting view of the years. But to judge from photographs of portraits and still life paintings displayed at the Jamestown Exposition, much of it deserved to be protected and conserved for future appreciators.³³

The relations of Negro art, music and literature to middle class intellectual movements like the Niagara conferences of 1905 and after were destined to remain artificial. Whereas, these conferences were to project a program for the integration of the Negro in our national life, they proceeded on a narrow basis of racial chauvinism as well as a poorly documented conception of African background and achievements. In view of this non-realistic approach to our tremendous problems of racial adjustment and economic assimilation, their attempts to mobilize the most fundamental instruments of cultural effort were fore-

³³ *Vid.* Giles B. Jackson and D. Webster Davis, *The Industrial History of the Negro Race in the United States*. (Richmond, Va.: The Virginia Press, 1908), *passim*.

doomed to failure. The Negro professional middle-class leaders of this movement were unable to get close enough to the masses to affect the real subsoil of our cultural problem.³⁴

It became increasingly plain to many that if the arts were to prosper among Negroes only the practical efforts of the "lovers and hangers-on" of such interests would make them do so. Negroes began to essay glee and chorus groups, were encouraged to make their own arrangements of Negro spirituals and folksongs. The Negro music world was inspired by the able performances of such individuals as Samuel Coleridge Taylor, Black Patti and others. In Boston, New York and Washington, D. C. societies for self-education in an cooperative study of the arts and crafts were formed.

The transforming yeast of the new race-consciousness was beginning to take effect among the painters and sculptors, but more slowly. After all, the Negro painters and sculptors were not yet aware of a pertinent folk-heritage comparable to that of the musician. They, accordingly, did one of two things. They held more or less narrowly to the tenets of their artistic training or worked simply and naively, without reference to racial tradition. The strongest single influence on the Negro artist of the first decade continued to be the realistic tradition of the schools. Meanwhile, nothing to which the artist turned his hand revealed definite racial bias, unless it is possible to read into the religious pre-occupations of Tanner some reflections of the same.

It is interesting to note that the Negro artist was troubled with the same doubts and discouragements that assail him today. Cultural segregation was then raising

³⁴ James D. Allen, *The Negro Question in the United States*. (New York: International Publishers, 1936), 151ff. It should be mentioned, however, that the manifesto of the Niagara conference did recognize an imperative demand for "well-quipped trade and technical schools for the training of artisans."

the same questions in his mind as vex the careers of countless aspiring talents who on every hand are seeking private employment or commissions from the Federal Government. Just now, it should be interesting to read the opinions advanced by a Negro and a white writer around 1906 who occasionally published in the *Voice of the Negro*. Said W. O. Thompson in one issue of this periodical:

. . . Perhaps not alone in the art of landscape, but in none of the branches of painting, where the best emanates, are conditions scarcely other than that of discouragement and harsh criticism. Both Mr. Collins and Mr. DeVilliss [Negro painters] have to face those conditions that success in art, in any phase, incurs, plus those discouragements that take the form of ethnic powers. But poor drawing and bad coloring are more to be feared than the latter.

For the sake of drawing the picture in more complete fashion the reader is asked to bear with another long quotation, this time from the white columnist, Florence Bentley, sometime art and literature critic on the *Chicago Record-Herald*.

This is Mr. Harper's second important exhibition, and it indicates that he has in no way fallen from the standard of excellence which he set in the canvases shown last year in the Chicago Artists' Exhibition, when he made his first bow before an American public . . . The work shown last year was the fruit of Mr. Harper's year of study in France and England. "An Afternoon, Montigny" was especially distinguished for beauty of color and atmospheric qualities, and richly deserved the central position which it held in the large gallery. The group of English and French landscapes are doubly significant, from the standpoint of the artist's development. They not only reveal that freshness and youthful charm which usually accompany the first utterances of a strongly poetic nature, but they, in a way, represent the end of one phase of the man's art life—the period when the young student, with that modesty which befits inexperience, and that early reverence for tradition which is at the root of all culture, confines his search for beauty to well-traveled roads and to places made sacred by the brush of masters.

Voluntarily to take one's place with a struggling minority, demands a degree of courage, and the artist who insists on offering to American buyers beauty purely American, such is the paradox of our boasted democracy, places his bread and butter in a very perilous place, and it must be admitted that bread and butter are

of an importance that must appeal at times to the most enthusiastic dreamer. But when it is considered that this devoted worker is a Negro, one of that class of Americans of whom American prejudice makes nothing good for granted, the situation is not without peculiar interest.³⁵

It is too easy to dismiss these remarks as puerile and as harboring a sentimental propensity. They have a certain right to our interest, for they were intended to play an intermediate role between artist and public. In the case of each of these artists the service was richly merited. Samuel Collins and Clinton DeVillis were among the transitional pioneers who were largely self-taught and who may be regarded as a genuinely native product. With greater opportunity they might have done work comparable to that of John Sloan, George Luks, and Everett Shinn, who founded in the first decade the so-called "Ashean" School of American art.³⁶

Collins took to the illustration of American rural landscape and left behind some superlatively brilliant interpretations of that genre. DeVillis was a sailor and demonstrated his love for boats and the sea in a number of rapidly brushed marines, which have all the spontaneity of watercolor painting.

The death of William A. Harper in 1910 marks a decade of serious effort by Negro artists towards various goals. It was not a decade of supreme accomplishment by any means, nor yet one of flattering material prosperity for the artist. Our introduction of this period was intended to offset any misapprehension as to the dominant trends in

³⁵ Bentley, Florence L., "William A. Harper," *The Voice of the Negro*, II, 11 (1906), 118ff.

³⁶ This statement is meant to convey the fact that these two artists were first and last interested in their immediate surroundings. They neglected neither American landscape nor the social aspects of the life of their day. Among their subjects were studies of farming, the activities of the local waterfront, horse-racing and hunting. These subjects were sufficiently popular in type to interest artists like George Luks, Robert Henri, Sloan, Glackens and illustrators like Charles Dana Gibson who were helping to consolidate the gains made by the American realist school at the beginning of the century.

Negro life at this time; but it is less difficult to understand the general social conditions surrounding the artists than it is to gauge their actual accomplishments, since much of their work has disappeared from view and is preserved largely for us in photographic reproductions, sometimes of rather poor quality.

Not even William Edouard Scott, who in the early years of this period had started his career in the *metier* of the illustrator, was comparable within his own sphere of interest to the more concentrated Harper. Scott's early illustrations were done in pen and ink and wash and frequently dealt with Negro subjects. Later he studied with H. O. Tanner in Paris and produced *La Pauvre Voisine*, which was purchased by the Argentine Government. Still later, he made a visit to Haiti and created there a series of paintings which adds greatly to the exotic interest of Negro art.

Two of the most talented men of this period were prevented by death from completely fulfilling early promise. Richard Lonsdale Brown and Lenwood Morris were cut off in mid-career by failing health. Brown died in December, 1917, leaving behind a few poignantly lyric landscapes and a number of characterful portraits. Morris had hardly completed his training as an art student when life ended for him; but there are extant two excellent portraits which he executed in a rapid, trenchant style—portraits which definitely gave promise of fine achievement.

Vital contributions to Negro art were made by May Howard Jackson, sculptor, and Laura Wheeler (Mrs. Warrick), E. A. Harleston, Palmer Hayden, painters, prior to 1920. Unlike Meta Vaux Warrick, May Howard Jackson chose to remain completely American in training. She had a certificate attesting a period of study in the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts. Some of her bronzes and plasters show that she was an expert modeller. "Suffer Little Children to Come unto Me" is a fine example of this sculptor's

strong grasp of representative realism; and in her portraits, such as the "Kelly Miller" and "Francis Grimké," we have very convincing evidence of an intense and lucid temperament.

Laura Wheeler, E. A. Harleston and Palmer Hayden all dealt with the Negro theme. Miss Wheeler devoted what we may call a period of apprenticeship to the Negro theme when, in Algiers, she made a quantity of sketches of Negroes and Arabs against the gleaming walls of their public buildings or in the blue shadows of their arcaded markets. The most directly concerned with the Negro, however, was Harleston, who has left us some unforgettable renderings of "The Old Servant" and "The Negro Soldier," both rich in sensuous and psychological values and done before 1925.

In addition to all the foregoing we have the best work of Henry O. Tanner as testimony to the fact that Negro art was opening new vistas for its public and laying the groundwork for greater artistic effulgence. No one could dispute the position of Tanner in the second and third decades as one of the leaders of American art. And it is my firm belief that in the work of this artist the Negro found the purest expression of his deep-seated and abiding joy in religious expression and dramatic avowals of faith in scriptural text.

Throughout this diverting period of cultural development Negro artists were occasionally marking their progress with retrospective exhibitions. As early as 1912 there had taken place an exhibition by the "colored students of greater New York." A communication to the *Washington Star* for August, 1915, states that an art exhibit of the works of "Colored folk" sponsored by the *Phi Beta Sigma* fraternity was about to close. Some of the entries in this show were by no means puny. They were sent by persons of the calibre of Richard Lonsdale Brown, May Howard Jackson and Samuel O. Collins.

Between this and the next important exhibition there was a brief interlude of six years. A more comprehensive

showing by Eastern artists was held in August and September, 1921, with the assistance of a large executive committee composed of some of the outstanding colored citizens of New York. Held in the public rooms of the 135th Street Branch of the New York Public Library, it included 198 pieces of work. Not all the examples were original; nor did the greater part give occasion for rapturous comment. Notwithstanding, the exhibition as a whole, supplemented as it was with historical and bibliographical displays, did stimulate new hopes for an even greater future for the Negro artist. The presence of works by certain artists in this exhibition, veterans like Tanner and Scott, gave it unsailable stability, and even raised the suggestion that there for the first time was a worthy chronological array of modern Negro art.³⁷

From another point of view this exhibition was a stock-taking of the effort of two decades. The Negro artist paused to see what he had accomplished; and we may truthfully say that America was at last being made conscious of the collective strength of the Negro artist. Therefore the artistic regeneration of the Negro definitely commenced in the second decade of our century. The phrase "New Negro Movement" itself was based on the belief that the New Negro masses were about to take more positive place in the cultural and economic life of the nation. Perhaps this term as applied in this instance was brilliant press-agenting rather than close-fitting appraisal; but we are still too close to the period either to affirm or deny.

As to the direct causes of this revived self-consciousness of the Negro we are able to make more candid statements. We know that it was first prodded into life as far back as 1915 when W. E. B. DuBois published in the *Crisis* his famous call for the reorganization and general heightening of Negro life, reminding the whole Negro group of its cul-

³⁷ *Vid. Catalog of the Negro Arts Exhibit*, held at the New York Public Library, 103 West 135th Street, August 1 to September 30, 1921.

tural opportunities and obligations. We know further that the continuous labors of serious-minded Negro writers, musicians and artists of the first twenty years had helped to prepare the Negro soul for the spiritual crisis of the third decade and of later years. Furthermore, it is now clear, as it was certain to some of those present at the birth of the movement, that the post-war restlessness of the Negro population and the vast shifting of economic and social balances within the national scheme of things underlay the diversified artistic expression that poured forth from Negro minds and hands after the third decade was begun. In a word, the harvest of 1927 and later was of grain that had been ripening longer than a decade.

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