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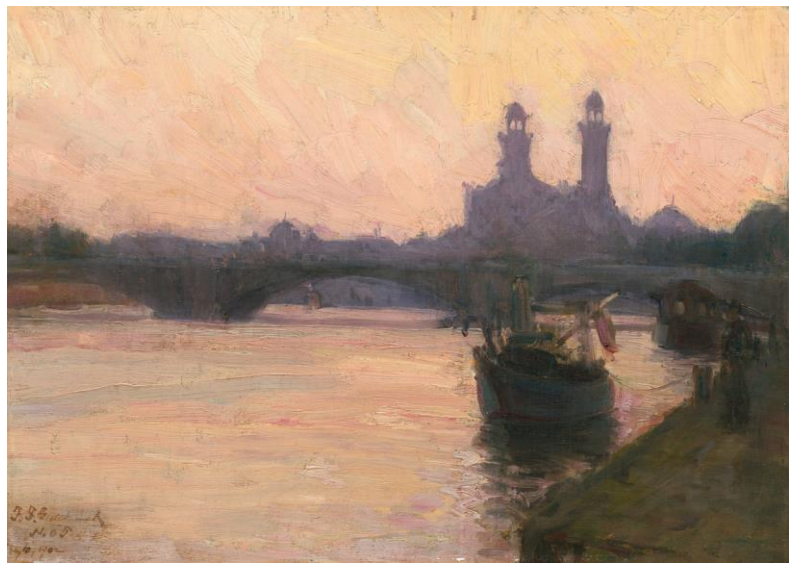
African American Artists as Agents of Modernism: A Challenge for American Art

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The essays in this special section, *Riff: African American Artists and the European Canon*, demonstrate something of the range of African American artists’ engagement with European art. Just as important is the methodological shift these essays represent. It was not long ago that historians of American art considered the work of African American artists derivative of the European and Euro-American artists who were hailed as innovators and whose work formed the canon.

Historians of American art once assumed that African American artists passively accepted the guidance of the masters of

modernism and made derivative work as a result. This model framed history in terms of the ways African American artists have been influenced by European art—a model that presumes the European tradition is the subject and African Americans are the object on which it acts. The result is what Michele Wallace has called “invisibility.”¹ The originality of black creativity could not be recognized, she argues, when modernism was understood as a purely European and Euro-American tradition and not as the result of a long history of intercultural exchange.² Consequently, beginning in the 1920s, African American scholars began to define distinctly African American approaches to modernism to establish the authority of a distinctly African American perspective and counter their marginalization. As the essays in this special section demonstrate, all of this has begun to change. The authors explore some of the ways in which African American artists have engaged critically and deliberately with European art and artists. This is to move beyond simply writing a more inclusive history of art to understanding African Americans as active participants in the history of modernism.



Henry Ossawa Tanner, *The Seine*, c. 1902. Oil on canvas, 9 x 13 in.
Courtesy National Gallery of Art, Washington, Gift of the Avalon Foundation

Understanding how we have arrived at this ongoing project of recognizing the agency of African American artists within histories of American art—as well as broader, international histories of modernism and contemporary art—requires thinking about changes that have occurred in the fields of American and African American art. If American scholars have long sought to demonstrate that the work of American artists is not derivative of European art, Americanists have also, until recently, been guilty of assuming African Americans made work that was derivative of that of their Euro-American peers. Thirty years ago, Wanda Corn demonstrated that until sometime between the 1960s and 1980s, scholars of American art had sought to counter approaches that prioritized the formal innovations of European art, and especially the European avant-garde, by seeking to demonstrate the uniqueness of American art; its “Americanness.”³ The paradox of this approach, as Corn points out, is that it “served to ghettoize the field within art history,” isolating the field and enabling scholars of European art to continue to marginalize the work of American artists as irrelevant to the broader history of art.⁴ Scholars of African American art have demonstrated that a similar fate befell the work of African American artists, but with effects that have lasted longer and that continue to isolate African American art to some degree.

Over the past twenty-five years, a series of historiographic studies of African American art by James Smalls, Lowery Stokes Sims, Jacqueline Francis, Kymberly Pinder, Bridget Cooks, Darby English, and others have demonstrated that the field has been defined both from within and without in ways that have until only recently diminished its significance to broader histories of American art as well as to histories of international modernism and contemporary art.⁵ They demonstrate that from within, writers have argued that the work of African American artists will represent a shared and singular “black experience,” sometimes through a focus on artist biography, including obstacles overcome.⁶ While this approach has provided a means to establish what Richard Powell has called “black cultural subjectivity,” it has inadvertently served to justify the perspective of those outside the field who have too often judged art according to qualities defined to privilege and reiterate norms of whiteness in (Euro-) American culture.⁷

Beginning in the 1920s, African American scholars focused on demonstrating what was unique about the work of African American artists in order to demonstrate its importance and challenge the supposed supremacy of the work of their white peers.⁸ For example, Alain Locke argued that the artwork made by African Americans was the most representative of Americanness because African American culture developed wholly in response to American circumstances. He argued that African American cultural traditions began in North America under conditions of slavery that had severed African Americans from their African cultural heritage, meaning that they began with a blank slate and created something unique out of necessity, whereas Euro-American culture derived directly from European culture.⁹ In this model, African American culture is original and authentically American while Euro-American culture is derivative. At the same time, Locke was a cultural pluralist. He called for the New Negro artist to look to European art as a model for critical self-reflection, with the added advantage that European artists had proven the value of African art.¹⁰ The New Negro artist might therefore engage with European modernism, African art, and African American history and culture to develop unique means of modernist expression that could be recognized on an international stage as representative of African American culture alongside the cultural nationalist projects of Europe.¹¹

The risk at the heart of this cultural nationalism is that, despite Locke’s pluralism, white art critics and historians represented the uniqueness of African American art as a limitation.

The idea of the uniqueness of African American art came to serve as a double-edged sword. According to Francis, by end of the 1920s, art critics who disregarded the pluralism of Locke and, later, of James Porter, made it clear that "antinaturalistic, modernist modes were, by inference, 'white' styles belonging to Europeans and European Americans."¹² Smalls argues that efforts through the 1970s to define a canon of African American art gave license to museums and historians to regard African American art as a "separatist" project and therefore outside the realm of American art or European modernism.¹³ The result has been that what Adrienne Childs refers to in her introduction to this series of essays as the "unsanctioned voices" of African American modernism have been marginalized.

Another consequence of the idea that African Americans will necessarily make work that reflects a shared history and culture is that scholarship on the work of African American artists has been preoccupied with questions of how their work represents "the authentic black experience."¹⁴ Sims has argued that because art historians have assumed African American artists will make certain kinds of art representative of a shared experience, "the identity of the artist is by necessity conflated with the character of his or her work. . . . The agent becomes subsumed by his or her subject" to the exclusion of all other possibilities.¹⁵ This is the point of Darby English's critique of what he calls "representativeness," the dilemma that the work of African American artists is judged according to presuppositions of cultural authenticity.¹⁶ Aware of these dilemmas since the 1990s, art historians have explored a range of new, more critical approaches to studying the work of African American artists.

One approach championed since the 1990s has been to understand American art as the result of pluralism. However, because American pluralism has been defined as much by conflict and exclusion as by mutual exchange, such an approach is necessarily charged and risky. Locke recognized this in the 1920s, framing it in terms of a metaphorical choice: "new Armadas of conflict or argosies of cultural exchange and enlightenment."¹⁷ In the 1990s, Sims expressed her skepticism in terms of the unequal power dynamics at play in American culture, writing:

Over the last four hundred years, "American," . . . has come to mean European-derived, relegating a succession of "others" to exclusion or marginalization. This not only nullifies the agency of African, Asian, Native, Latino, and Latin American artists within the American identity, but also overrides the recognition of cultural expressions and modes of expression unique to this country, which have been born [*sic*] out of the abutment, however acrimonious, of two or more cultures.¹⁸

Attempts to write a history of American art that accounts for such pluralism will need to acknowledge cultural conflict as much as exchange, exclusions as much as encounters. Writing just two years after Sims, Michael Leja optimistically reversed the consequences of this situation in his critique of the field of American art, arguing that:

The growth of specialized study of African, Asian, and Native American visual traditions—as they thrive in the Americas, undergo transformations and adaptations to new situations, intermix or conflict with Euroamerican traditions, and become vehicles of cultural assimilation or differentiation—has both energized the field and eroded its former Euroamerocentric integrity as a field.¹⁹

Leja, like Sims, acknowledged that a more inclusive approach to American art requires questioning the very terms by which we judge American culture and Americanness. Scholars of African American art have perhaps been warier of pluralism than others. If artists must be recognized as participants in the movements with which they engaged, must this exclude discussions of race?²⁰ Smalls has warned of attempts to understand art without reference to race, an approach sometimes derided as "colorblindness," as an ahistorical effort to assimilate African American artists "into a vague pool of 'melting pot' Americanism."²¹ In the 1990s, Powell, Judith Wilson, Kobena Mercer, and others developed a model for studying the work of African American artists that accounts for the various ways in which artwork by African American artists might engage differently with different audiences in a range of historically specific ways. As Powell explained, "rather than being intellectually bound by the perceived race or nationality of a creator," the historian must look instead "to the art object itself, its multiple worlds of meaning, and its place in the social production of black identities."²² Since then, Francis and others have crystallized a more critically apprehensive approach to inclusive histories of American art and international modernism and contemporary art as the practice of "critical race art history."²³ The scholars I have quoted, and many more, have participated in a significant shift in the field that has seen historians of American art adopt a range of critical approaches to addressing the agency of African American artists.

The essays in this forum, *Riff: African American Artists and the European Canon*, represent some of the new methodologies that have enabled art historians to challenge the old, Eurocentric and Euroamerocentric (to borrow Leja's usefully awkward term) histories of modernist and contemporary art. Francis and Nikki Greene provide examples of African American artists who drew upon a range of artistic practices and sources, including the history of art, because they aspired to reach beyond what many considered the delimiting specificity of race. Francis argues for understanding Romare Bearden's *Mauritius* in the context of a gallery dedicated to transatlantic modernism and in terms of Bearden's interest in the history of European art to create meanings that are both universal and particular. By using techniques of modernist assemblage to reference Renaissance sculptures of the black warrior St. Maurice, she explains, *Mauritius* paid homage "to every fighting man—black and nonblack, of Bearden's time and of all time" through a process of "collaboration, creative association, and individual innovation." Greene argues that Moe A. Brooker has developed a practice that draws upon the work of two of his predecessors, Henry Ossawa Tanner and Wassily Kandinsky, as well as the ability of jazz improvisation to address black vernacular culture, to create abstract paintings that might engage viewers with the divine in ways that exceed matters of race or religion.

Julie McGee complicates the usual narrative of African American artists inspired from afar by European art by exploring how Sam Middleton developed what she characterizes as an internationalist practice of collage while establishing himself as a participant in the Dutch art scene. McGee demonstrates that while writers have sometimes struggled with questions of whether to treat Middleton as an American, African American, or European artist, Middleton insistently grounded his work in the international community in which he worked while also insisting on his Americanness. Gwendolyn Shaw discusses a strategy of Carrie Mae Weems, who photographs herself from behind as she looks upon a landscape of historical significance in some of her photographs from The Louisiana Project. Shaw builds on the strategy to propose a theory of the "wandering gaze" that enables viewers to imaginatively occupy the empowering authority of multiple subject positions. She argues

that Weems may have based her approach on the Caspar David Friedrich painting *Wanderer Above a Sea of Fog*, borrowing not a style or subject matter but a representational strategy for establishing the authority of the artist and viewer. Smalls explores the classicism in the work of James Richmond Barthé, exploring how the artist addresses the aesthetic and political roles of race and homoeroticism while also acknowledging the sometimes conflicting discourses and contentious dialogues that result from the appropriation, incorporation, and bestowal of elements of a classicizing ethos onto the racially distinctive body. As Smalls suggests, Barthé's critical and reflexive embrace of classicism challenged traditional assumptions about the supposedly inherent whiteness of the classical tradition. Smalls's approach suggests the importance of reversing a question too often asked of African American artists in the past: why find inspiration in an artistic tradition that has served to establish the visual and representational authority of whiteness? Instead, Smalls asks what this question reveals about the ways in which the politics of race infiltrate the art of European and Euro-American artists in ways that typically pass unacknowledged.

As each author demonstrates, African American artists have advanced modernism even as they have critically engaged with it. It should no longer seem surprising that African American artists explore European art for many of the same reasons other American artists have and that, in the process, they have exposed the normative cultural values that have been used to justify their marginalization. While much work remains to be done, it is promising that since the late 1990s, scholars of American art have begun to embrace the critical methods developed by scholars of African American art and ask challenging questions about how we write the history of American art.

Notes

I am grateful to Adrienne Childs and Jacqueline Francis for inviting me to respond to the essays in Riff: African American Artists and the European Canon.

- ¹ Michele Wallace, "Modernism, Postmodernism, and the Problem of the Visual in Afro-American Culture," in Russell Ferguson, Martha Gever, Trinh T. Minh-ha, and Cornel West, eds., *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990), 43.
- ² Wallace, "Modernism, Postmodernism, and the Problem of the Visual in Afro-American Culture," 45–46.
- ³ Wanda Corn, "Coming of Age: Historical Scholarship in American Art," *Art Bulletin* 70, no. 2 (June 1988): 189. See also John Davis, "The End of the American Century: Current Scholarship on the Art of the United States," *Art Bulletin* 85, no. 3 (September 2003): 544, 561.
- ⁴ Corn, "Coming of Age," 192.
- ⁵ By turn, some have pointed out that African American art is sometimes privileged over modern and contemporary art of Africa and the African diaspora. See Sylvester Okwunodu Ogbechie and John Peffer, "Is African Art History?" *Critical Interventions* 1, no. 1 (January 1, 2007): 2.
- ⁶ James Smalls, "A Ghost of a Chance: Invisibility and Elision in African American Art Historical Practice," *Art Documentation* 13, no. 4 (Spring 1994): 4; Jacqueline Francis, "Writing African American Art History," *American Art* 17, no. 1 (2003): 5.
- ⁷ Richard J. Powell, *Black Art and Culture in the 20th Century* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1997), 19. Also see Smalls, "A Ghost of a Chance," 7; Francis, "Writing African American Art History," 4, 5; Lowery Stokes Sims, "Subject/Subjectivity and Agency in the Art of African Americans," *Art Bulletin* 76, no. 4

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- (December 1994): 588; and Bridget R. Cooks, *Exhibiting Blackness: African Americans and the American Art Museum* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2011), 6–7.
- ⁸ Smalls, "A Ghost of a Chance," 3; Francis, "Writing African American Art History," 4; and Darby English, *1971: A Year in the Life of Color* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 97–98. See also Mary Ann Calo, *Distinction and Denial: Race, Nation, and the Critical Construction of the African American Artist, 1920–1940* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007), 27–28.
- ⁹ Alain Locke, "The Negro in Art," *Bulletin of the Association of American Colleges* 17, no. 3 (November 1931): 359, 361.
- ¹⁰ Alain Locke, "A Note on African Art," *Opportunity* 2, no. 17 (May 1924): 134–38; and Alain Locke, "The African Legacy and the Negro Artist," in *Exhibition of the Work of Negro Artists* (New York: Harmon Foundation, 1931), 12.
- ¹¹ Alain Locke, "Enter the New Negro," in "Harlem: Mecca of the New Negro," a special issue edited by Alain Locke, *Survey Graphic* 6, no. 6 (March 1925): 633–34.
- ¹² Francis, "Writing African American Art History," 4.
- ¹³ Smalls, "A Ghost of a Chance," 4, 6. See also Cooks, *Exhibiting Blackness*, 11–12. Darby English demonstrates that this pattern continues; see English, *1971*, 74.
- ¹⁴ Francis, "Writing African American Art History," 4. See also Kymberly N. Pinder, "Black Representation and Western Survey Textbooks," *Art Bulletin* 81, no. 3 (September 1999): 533; and English, *1971*, 72.
- ¹⁵ Sims, "Subject/Subjectivity and Agency in the Art of African Americans," 587.
- ¹⁶ Darby English, *How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), 7.
- ¹⁷ Locke, "Enter the New Negro," 634.
- ¹⁸ Sims, "Subject/Subjectivity and Agency in the Art of African Americans," 588.
- ¹⁹ Michael Leja, "American Art's Shifting Boundaries," *American Art* 11, no. 2 (Summer 1997): 48.
- ²⁰ Pinder, "Black Representation and Western Survey Textbooks," 536.
- ²¹ Smalls, "A Ghost of a Chance," 7. See also Sims, "Subject/Subjectivity and Agency in the Art of African Americans," 588.
- ²² Powell, *Black Art and Culture in the 20th Century*, 22.
- ²³ Francis, "Writing African American Art History," 9. Francis and others have advocated for "critical race art history" in print and through the Association for Critical Race Art History, an affiliate society of the College Art Association that she and Camara Dia Holloway founded. For more about the Association for Critical Race Art History, see the association's web site, <https://acrah.org>.