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(COVER: Benjamin Jones' "BLACK FACE and ARM UNIT" (1972) refreshingly introduces the beauty of African form and design to make emphatic his positive feelings about the culture of black people. This young Paterson, New Jersey-born artist clearly demonstrates the art of adhering to universal esthetic standards without sacrificing, in any way, the ethnic content of his creation. Mr. Jones holds a master's degree in Art from New York University; did research in Paris on traditional African art, and an native West African architecture in Senegal, Ghana, Upper Volta, Nigeria, Mali, and Togo, with course work at the University of Science and Technology, Kumasi, Ghana. His works have been shown in more than twenty exhibitions, published in many magazines, newspapers and books; and are in several collections. He received a 1974-75 grant from the National Endowment for Artists and is an art instructor at Jersey City State College, Jersey City, New Jersey.

# VISUAL CREATIVITY BY AFRO-AMERICANS: A CRITICAL OVERVIEW

by  
HENRI GHENT

Contrary to the uncritical myth that the Afro-American is creatively bankrupt, significant contributions have been made by the "Invisible American" to the growing art heritage of this country. Such myths have served, among other things, to malign the black man in America — most especially if his talents and inspirations dictate the pursuit of a career in the field of fine arts. A brief historical overview will reveal that the black American has freely participated in, as well as contributed qualitatively to, the American art scene since first setting foot on the shore of his adopted homeland.

In an effort to offset the popular notion that American slaves merely picked cotton from sunrise to sunset or served as house menials, it must be established that many were found to be very valuable because of their skill in the manual arts. Unquestionably, many slaves' penchant for making wrought iron, for example, reflected their prior acquaintance with, and mastery of, this sophisticated skill. The small iron utensils made by American slaves probably were not at all unlike those cooking vessels created by African artisans. Several Southern states (e.g., Alabama, Mississippi, Georgia and Louisiana) provide excellent examples of the slaves' skill in wrought iron as it had been applied to a most decorative and practical end. The stately plantation homes of the slave-masters typically display ornate iron balustrades that offered the desired support in addition to a decidedly elegant decorative effect. Black craftsmen were equally ingenious in their dexterity with wood and textiles — skills obviously inherited from their gifted ancestors. One would naturally assume, therefore, that art historians in particular — as well as art connoisseurs — would curiously look to Afro-American artists, as direct descendants of this African heritage, for an extension of this vitality in art.

However, in trying to discover a link between ancient African art and art created by Afro-Americans, one should not expect these artists to repeat traditional African art forms simply because of their ancestral bond. The very lack of contact with Mother Africa — together with centuries of forced acculturation — has indeed served to weaken the black American's knowledge of and freedom to exercise those skills requisite to creative continuity of traditional art. What should be discerned is the marriage of this African spirit and a temperament that has been shaped out of the blacks' "unique" experience in America.

Myth would also have us believe that blacks are of a uni-life style, while they are — in fact — very much a diverse people. A careful examination of blacks representing various socio-economic, educational and political strata will reveal

that this diversity of life style does not alter the basic existence of their common consciousness. Black artists are as diverse as the black populace in general. Their creativity clearly reflects the difference in the conditions and circumstances out of which it grew. (One divergent aspect of black creativity is the current black "nationalist" art movement which will be herein discussed).

Well before the Civil War (1861-1865), America shared — along with other nations — a deep concern for industrialization; blacks with distinct manual skills found ready employment and, by virtue of such, they added immeasurably to the New World's industrial revolution.

Investigations also reveal that prior to the Civil War, there were slaves — as well as free blacks — who seriously pursued the art of painting and sculpture, the first known black painter being Scipio Morehead (ca. 1773). After the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution — abolishing slavery in America in 1865 — the number of blacks endeavoring to earn their livelihood from art increased markedly. The mid-19th century, however, was not a joyous time for artists in America — whatever their

race or color — the primary reason being the national preoccupation with economic concerns. This, naturally, left little time or energy to be devoted to the development and nurture of an artistic elite. America's foremost concerns for industrialization and westward expansion greatly diminished existing interest in the sustenance of artistic pursuits. As a consequence, all artists — black and white alike — suffered neglect; naturally, the black artist suffered more. Despite all, the black artist maintained his integrity and persisted in painting and sculpture in the accepted modes of the period. The sampling of representative Afro-American artists that will be discussed or mentioned here will serve to illustrate that: (1) black artists worked hard to achieve technical mastery of media; (2) were vulnerable to popular stylistic influences; and (3) they achieved varying degrees of success — exactly like their white American counterparts.

Robert S. Duncanson (1817-1872) and Edward M. Bannister (1828-1901) were two Afro-American landscape painters who enjoyed impressive

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Duncanson's "Blue Hole, Flood Waters, Miami River"

## TO OUR READERS, THANKS . . .

We are appreciative indeed for the great number of comments received in praise of the four-part series, *The Global Presence of Blacks and Its Impact on Culture*, which was completed in the last issue. The comments confirm the belief that readers are anxious to identify our scholars and are delighted to see that they are willing to share their knowledge beyond classrooms and scholarly journals circulated among academicians. At this stage of developing *National Scene*, we shall continue to rely upon these untapped sources for papers on a variety of subjects which will be programmed.

It is obvious that the twelve-page size of our publication, dictated by economics, is insufficient to serve our purposes. Strenuous efforts therefore are being made to remedy this problem so that a minimum of sixteen pages, which will permit use of larger print, may be produced on a regular monthly frequency.

In this issue, the papers that were intended to be reproduced have been rescheduled in order to

extend the essence of the Global series which relates so well with the objectives of The 2nd World and African Festival of Arts and Culture. The event was to be held in Lagos, Nigeria, November 22nd through December 20th of this year but postponement became necessary. This development is regretted of course but it does not affect our endeavor to provide analytical appraisals of Afro-Americans' achievements in the areas of plastic arts and literature. The information provided will enable readers to know the extent of the input which these scholars and artists will be able to make when the festival is held. The information will also enhance appreciation of what the festival is all about so that reports of what transpired at the event will be better understood.

There have been too few purposeful international gatherings of any kind by black people. As a consequence, we do not know nor understand the culture of one another. It is hoped however that the International Congress of Africanists which convened in Ethiopia last year, for its third assembly, will be able to institute a program which will bring black people together often, formally and informally.

The festival, although not under the auspices of the Congress, will be a most significant event for participants and spectators. It will be a show-

case of exemplary talent synthesizing their African heritage with modern-day technology to advance the progress of mankind. The festival is indeed worthy of our moral and financial support, as well as the presence of those who will be able to attend.

We cannot stress too strongly the need to broaden the provincial thinking of our welfare in the United States. Other ethnic groups, notwithstanding their American citizenship and length of stay in this country, have maintained for years an allegiance with their mother country and a working relationship with fellow expatriates in other countries. The effectiveness of this move transcends personal interests, for we see all other countries. The effectiveness of this effort around us the political clout which unity generates. The subject struck home this past August when Secretary of State Kissinger, conferring with members of the Congressional Black Caucus, admitted that the United States did not have a foreign policy with regard to Africa and asked the members to devise one for his study.

Implicit in Mr. Kissinger's statement is the fact that black people are not together and therefore are inconsequential in matters relating to world affairs. It is clear that this is a challenge to black people to join hands in unity, wherever they are, people, wherever they are, to join hands in unity.