

VISUAL CREATIVITY

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reputations as first-rate artists of their time. The style and content of Duncanson's works were very much akin to the style of painting which emanated from the Hudson River "school." Similarly, Duncanson and Jasper Francis Cropsey—a white artist who espoused the same style—were at ease when painting some local scenes of America's vast panoramic landscape. The Hudson River painters, as they were known, actually fashioned their style after the romantic naturalism that was so popular in Europe at the time. Duncanson's "Blue Hole, Flood Waters, Little Miami River" which makes his meticulous concern for realistic detail very obvious, is equally reminiscent of Cropsey's "Autumn on the Hudson River," a shining example of that particular mode of painting. On the other hand, Duncanson's "Blue Hole . . ." is considered one of the finest nineteenth-century landscapes ever painted by an American artist. Tennyson remarked that Duncanson's interpretation of his poem, "The Lotus Eaters", had successfully captured the essence of his poetry. Yet American art historians have chosen to overlook these facts. "The Lotus Eaters" was first exhibited in England, thereby establishing a substantial reputation for the black artist in the British Isles. Unfortunately, the present whereabouts of the painting is unknown.

Bannister gave firm evidence of his artistic prowess earlier in his career as a portrait painter in Boston. The Rhode Island-born artist emerged strikingly victorious when he captured the first prize—a gold medal—at the 1876 Philadelphia Centennial Exhibition for his painting, "Under the Oaks." Strenuous efforts to find this work have, unfortunately, proved fruitless. It is reliably documented, however, that a Bostonian purchased the work for what is reputed to be the highest price ever paid for a 19th century landscape at the time. On the other hand, Bannister's "Driving Home the Cows" makes known to us that his painting inclinations also paralleled those laudatory attributes of the Hudson River landscapists.

Like most portrait painters of the early nineteenth century, black and white, Joshua Johnston of Baltimore, and William Simpson, a free black portraitist from Boston, found it difficult to support themselves by portrait painting alone, even though such commissions were granted by some of the wealthiest and most socially prominent families of their respective regions. They would, as a result, often have to resort to house or sign painting to make a living. Despite this intrusion on the progress of their technical skills, both artists succeeded in carving out highly respectable reputations for themselves.

The first known black American to achieve eminence as a neo-classical sculptor is Edmonia Lewis (1843-ca. 1890) whose early art training was received in Boston and later in Rome, Italy. Born of a Chippewa Indian mother and an Afro-American father, Edmonia apparently was possessed of an ingratiating personality that equalled her formidable talent. In Rome, she easily became a favorite of the expatriate American colony there. Her period of training in Italy found her occupied—like most sculptors of that era—with the problems of mastering advanced sculpture techniques that would enable her to create in the grand Graeco-Roman tradition. The sculptor's celebrated "Forever Free," a white marble statue that depicts an emancipated slave and his wife, clearly demonstrates that her aim to achieve a high degree of technical skill as a sculptor had been attained. Like Bannister, the work of the black sculptor was represented in the 1876 Philadelphia Centennial, and she is known to have exhibited in Europe. A major exhibition, *The White, Marmorean Flock*, at Vassar College in 1972 featuring nineteenth century American neo-classical sculptors, gave due prominence to the works of Edmonia Lewis.

The most celebrated of black American realist romantic painters is Henry Ossawa Tanner (1859-1937) who, although a native of Pittsburgh, spent the greatest part of his adult life in France where he died. Tanner commenced his studies at the Philadelphia Academy of Art where his principal teachers were the now-famous Thomas Eakins

very good friend of Eakins who did a portrait of his student which is now in the Hyde collection in Glens Falls, New York.

Tanner was an excellent draftsman, in the manner of the 19th century Romantics. He was often compared to Eakins; however, a more accurate comparison would be to both Albert Ryder and Albert Blakelock. While his works parallel that of these American masters, it also relates to Rembrandt in terms of technique and composition. Tanner's "Daniel in the Lion's Den" admirably illustrates this relationship. Well aware of his Negritude, Henry Tanner did not allow this concern to dominate his preference of subject matter. Although his painting, "The Banjo Lesson" (1893), is considered a classic work of an ethnic subject, for the most part Tanner found his inspiration in landscapes and in the portrayal of Biblical themes.



Tanner's "The Banjo Lesson"

and Thomas Hovenden. As a result he became a

While teaching as a very young man at Clark University in Atlanta, he met Bishop Hartzell of Cincinnati who was to play an important role in his artistic career. The Bishop was so impressed with Tanner's artistic ability that he arranged a one-man exhibition for him in Cincinnati. When the show ended, not one work was sold, but the Bishop himself bought the entire collection in an effort to help the young artist—morally and financially. With this money, Tanner left America for Europe to realize an ambition to work in an atmosphere free of the virulent racism that permeated all American life. During 1890 he enrolled in l'Academie Julien in Paris where he studied with Benjamin Constant and Jean-Paul Laurens. After five years of disciplined study, his painting, "The Young Sabot Maker", was shown at the prestigious *Salon des Artistes Francais*. From that auspicious debut, Tanner participated continuously in *Salon* shows until 1924. It was in 1897 that he gained international recognition—occasioned by the purchase of his work, "The Raising of Lazarus," by the French Government for the Luxembourg "The Annunciation" which is now in the collection of the Philadelphia Museum.

Tanner was virtually obsessed with the desire to reinforce his paintings with authenticity; thus he traveled widely—including trips to Palestine before the turn of the century and, much later, to North Africa. The ensuing years brought increased productivity, as well as numerous awards and honors to Tanner—the most significant was his nomination in 1923 by the French Government as *Chevalier de la Legion d'Honneur*. Later, America was to accord him a similar tribute by

making him a full member of its National Academy of Art and Design—the first black American to achieve this distinction. Except for an occasional visit to the United States, Tanner remained in France with his wife—a native of San Francisco—and his son, Jesse, who lives there to this day.

After his death in Paris on May 25, 1937, interest in Tanner's works diminished considerably. Largely as a result of a major exhibition of his paintings at Manhattan's Grand Central Galleries in December 1967, the most renowned of all black artists was "rediscovered." Two years later, The Smithsonian Institution in Washington presented a large retrospective exhibit of his oeuvre to critical and public acclaim. The show was then circulated extensively in this country. Major works of this black American master can be found in the principal museums in this coun-

couragement and financial support from various white philanthropic organizations—foremost among them was the Harmon Foundation. A survey of the *Harmon Collection of Negro Art* will confirm that the black artist of the twenties was extremely interested in: (1) Paying tribute to his African homeland; (2) reminiscing about his prior life in the South; and (3) offering commentary on the pleasures and problems surrounding his present urban existence. The overriding desire of the black artist to project his Negritude can be partially attributed to the penetrating effectiveness of Marcus Garvey's movement, the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA)—the group which successfully projected the philosophy that "black is beautiful."

The vast majority of American artists of the 1930's survived only because the Federal Arts Projects (WPA) made work for them. Many of the artists who were engaged by the FAP, and other federally supported community centers, went on to win considerable acclaim—among them Norman Lewis, Jacob Lawrence and Romare Bearden. After World War II, returning black veterans enrolled in art schools in unprecedented numbers. The artists who matured as a result of their involvement in the Federal Arts Program, and those who emerged from the art schools of the 1940's and 1950's, served as a nucleus to establish the most immediate source of inspiration for contemporary artists. In the meantime, the remissness of galleries and museums in providing exposure and encouragement, even to the qualitative black artists, only fed fuel to an already smoldering fire of increasing unrest in the national black artistic community. The directors of these public and private institutions continue to operate as the "artistic taste-makers of America," meaning, of course, that black artists are judged by double standards. A confrontation was inevitable.

The late 1960's gave birth to what may well be termed a revolution by heretofore unnoticed black artists against the white art establishment which is primary responsible for their "invisible" status in this country. Ironically, it was the Whitney Museum of American Art that blatantly excluded blacks from its 1968 survey of art created in the nineteen-thirties—a period when black artists began to emerge in appreciable numbers. Simultaneously with the opening of that exhibition, black artists (and a goodly number of whites as well) raised their voices and picket signs en masse in protest against the Whitney for its obvious racist attitude. A counter exhibition, featuring the works of those artists who were not included in the Whitney show, was organized at the Studio Museum in Harlem—causing a prominent critic on *The New York Times* to reluctantly concede that there were indeed some who should have been chosen for the Whitney exhibition.

Since then, however, not only did the Whitney stage a mammoth "black" show in 1970 (albeit of highly dubious merit), virtually every major university and museum in the country followed suit (the lordly Metropolitan opted for the infamous spectacle, *HARLEM ON MY MIND*). Ordinarily, one would be extremely proud—perhaps even grateful—if these gestures of professional exposure had produced the desired results: that quality black artists could enjoy participating in a kind of cultural democracy in the plastic arts, could be exhibited alongside their white counterparts without the slightest consideration for ethnicity. Almost without exception, the multitudinous "black" shows that have inundated us in recent years (lacking as they were in discriminating concern for individual excellence) can only be described as mere token actions by the art establishment—a situation that has been aided and abetted, unknowingly—by members of the current black "nationalist" art movement. The principal objective of the "nationalists," they maintain, is to elevate the status of "Negritude." Fine! But what distresses this writer is the fact that what they produce, for the most part, falls so far short of what can indeed be considered art, is an embarrassment. Moreover, their insistence on literally forcing their highly emotional and inconclusive ideology on their audience—together with an admitted disregard for universal aesthetic requirements—they only render a gross *disservice* to their cause. Aside from displaying their vulnerability as human beings, they, as artists, suffer doubly when they abandon essential concern for aesthetic criteria for the sake of politicizing! In other words, too many black artists who are "nationalist"-inclined are much too occupied with what they say rather than how well it should be said. There are, to be sure, notable exceptions—including Benjamin Jones

try and abroad, as well as in many university and private collections.

The year 1915 marked the beginning of the Great Northern Migration of blacks from the rural South to the urban North in quest of a better life. Migrant blacks poured into the cities at such a rate that these centers were not able to accommodate them properly; they found life severe in the ghettos that awaited them. Some intellectuals of that period, black and white, became disillusioned and sought redress through expatriation and became known as the "Lost Generation."

Among those remaining in the country were a large contingent of primarily New York-based black intellectuals (writers, painters and sculptors) who actively sought to analyze the national situation as it specifically related to black people. Black artists, particularly those concerned with helping all blacks gain a positive sense of identity, made a point of reacquainting them with their black heritage through their artistic creations. Among the "pioneers" whose deep concern for, and dedication to, the preservation of the Afro-American's artistic heritage and growth are painters Aaron Douglas, Palmer C. Hayden, W. H. Johnson, Malvin Gray Johnson, Allan Rohan Crite, Archibald Motley and Hale Woodruff, dean of Afro-American artists; also sculptors William Edmondson, Augusta Savage, Meta Warrick Fuller and Richmond Barthe—to name only a few. Black historian Lerone Bennett, Jr., remarks that "this era has gone down in history as the Negro Renaissance—a period of exceptional creativity by Negro artists and an equally exceptional receptivity on the part of white people." During the Renaissance, black artists received both en-

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