



Art Class by William H. Johnson (1943)

Where are All the Black Art Teachers?

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Abstract

African-Americans have a rich culture as it relates to American Art history. Many of these artists were taught and trained by African Americans themselves. The New Negro Movement [Harlem Renaissance] that began in the 1920s, gave birth to numerous art departments in historically Black Colleges and Universities across the country. With the 1954 Brown v. Board of Education United States Supreme Court decision to desegregate the schools, the culture and heritage of African-Americans was not integrated into the schools and subsequently not included into art curriculums. Studies by Robert Clements have shown that African-Americans respond better to the arts when they are taught by African-Americans that have the opportunities to share personal experiences and familiarities as they have one common connection -- race.

Where are all the black art teachers?

The historic United States Supreme Court case of *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* of 1954 called for the school district to reverse its segregation policy in its elementary schools. The opinion of the court was that public education was paramount to American culture. Chief Justice Earl Warren wrote, “the very foundation of good citizenship, they acknowledged that public education was not only necessary to prepare children for their future professions and to enable them to actively participate in the democratic process, but that it was also a principal instrument in awakening the child to cultural values” (Street Law Inc., n.d., para 2) Although there was no mention in cultural identity in the decision nearly all cultural identity was lost by African-American students. The textbooks that were being used in 1954, rarely if at all, addressed the struggles that began for blacks in 1619. This undoubtedly included the arts, not just in school but throughout the black community as well.

Before a conversation can begin as it relates to the arts that occurred as a result of the *Brown* decision you must first have a discussion of African-American art during the 19th century right up to the 1920s and 1930s. At the turn of the century during the Great Migration African-American families moved north looking for employment opportunities while escaping the hardships of racism that continued in the south. They would soon face similar situations in the northern cities as soldiers were returning home from World War I and now there was fierce competition for the few industrial jobs that were available (Bey, 2011). This began a trend for African-Americans to begin to take on a political façade when they were looking for their own identity and how exactly did they fit into American culture. The Negro Movement, which is also commonly called The Harlem Renaissance, was a dialogue amongst a cadre of African-American professionals in the fields of literature, dance, music, and art that addressed those very

questions. There are no factual dates for the start of the movement as it spanned over several decades as it was more of a development of ideas and traditions as opposed to a concrete shift in theory or practice.

Although Harlem had become the Mecca of African-Americans the Negro Movement spanned from the industrial north to the rural south and around the globe including European cities such as Paris. In the quest to seek out an identity many African-Americans felt that they were not getting a substantial amount of quality artistic training here in the states, so they travelled abroad for training, mainly France. Like the majority of American artists of the era, African-Americans artist sought acceptance by patterning their work on definitions of excellence and success by European cultural standards (Driskell, 2000). Hale Woodruff a pioneer in the Negro Movement studied at the Academie Scandinave in Paris before returning to the states as an art teacher to single handily start the art department at Atlanta University in 1931. He also was an educator for New York University for several years before eventually returning to Atlanta to complete his teaching career in 1967.

The Negro Movement fostered the emergence of African-American artists' into the mainstream art world. Artist such as Metta Fuller, Palmer Hayden, William H. Johnson and Aaron Douglas produced socially relevant art that was realistically done in the exploration of African-Americans life and artistic themes (Belton, 2011). The Negro Movement was a break from the norm of African-American artists to produce art to appease the taste and fulfillment of their white patrons. African-American artist began to make significant gains in their work as a forum of identity and began to use more imagery of African-American life in their work. Alain Locke a collector of African Art felt that the artist of the time had a social responsibility to promote the black race that was in dire need of repair and restoration. He promoted the concept

that African-American's should be proud of their heritage and history. It was Locke that said African-Americans would earn their respect by distancing themselves from White artist and not to copy what they do. (Bey, 2007) Locke was not alone in his opinion that African-American artists should have a more prominent political role during the 1920s and 1930s, W.E.B. Dubois was in favor of art that promoted political propaganda that would eventually get African-American art into the mainstream art world well beyond the Negro Movement.

The Negro Movement brought about an attitude for social change and raised the question of "What role would African-American artists play moving forward?" African-American artists began to take on a style of their own and break away from the influences that they received from the European academies they had been attending for decades. Aaron Douglas, an African-American artist-teacher during the Negro Movement established the art department at Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee. He can be considered a founder to what would become the Black Academy. The Black Academy, "continuous flow of encouragement, patronage, instruction, and mentoring that black artist received from other African-American individuals and institutions" (Driskell, 2002). The artists of the Negro Movement made the transition to teaching art at many of the historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). It was their dedication to preserving the culture of their ancestors along with their original purpose to prepare and train "colored teachers" (Taylor, J. C., 2012). Some of these colleges and universities not only taught some of the most influential African-American art educators of the 20th century they also became host to some of the finest collections of African-American art. One of these schools is Howard University in Washington, DC, whose art department was founded in 1921 by James Herring.



Figure 1. Art Class at Howard University, 1936. (photo credit: Digital Public Library of America)

One of the notable alumnae from Howard was Alma Thomas who graduated as one of the first female African-Americans to earn a degree in Fine Arts. Knowing the struggles that would have presented themselves to her as an African-American female artist she decided to become a teacher of the arts. She explained her decision by saying, “when I entered the art room, it was like entering heaven” (Kort, 2002, p. 215). Thomas was also one of the first female art teachers in Washington, DC public schools where she was a middle school teacher for over 35 years. She went on to continue her art education schooling by earning her Master’s degree in Art Education from Columbia University Teachers’ College in 1934. She was just one of many that took advantage of the opportunities presented by The Black Academy, to provide quality art education for those that wanted art education at a higher level.

In 1939, Hampton Institute in Virginia hired Viktor Lowenfeld as a psychology professor. He came to Hampton under the pretense that he was not to be an art teacher and that the students of Hampton were not interested in the arts. He offered a drawing class at night and 700 of the 750 students that attended Hampton signed-up. Lowenfeld, considered the *Father of American Art Education*, was able to draw out the creativity and personal experiences that these students had not yet been exposed to let alone been able to accomplish. Teachers in the past at Hampton tried to educate these students but were unsuccessful as they did not have the knowledge or skill set to allow them to reach their full potential. In 1943, the students that studied under Lowenfeld had an exhibition titled *Young Negro Art: An exhibition of the Work of Students at Hampton Institute* at the Young People's Gallery of the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Not surprisingly it received negative reviews as the masses outside of Black America were only remotely familiar with black Art and were not ready to see an exhibition of their work on the main stage in New York City (Smith, 1988). John Biggers, who was a student at Hampton that studied under Lowenfeld also became an art teacher after following Lowenfeld to Pennsylvania State University [to upstart their art program]. It was his theory of practice that teachers need to understand the history and cultures of the students that they are teaching to allow for social and emotional understanding. This would include their ancestral heritage, their social status, and the impact of western civilization and culture on blacks (Kennedy, 1998, p. 24).

When discussing African-American students in an art education curriculum, what is it that they are supposed to be learning, and who should teach it to them? These are two of the biggest questions that African-American art education curriculum is faced with. Even at such institutions such as Fisk, Hampton and Howard a bulk of the art historical references were concerning White European art. The art appreciation courses in the United States during the

1970s focused strictly on the achievements of the Western Europeans. Robert Clements conducted a study in 1978 on art education achievement rates of African-American students. He found that in eight general education text books that they contained over 4,000 reproductions of that number only 10 were of African-American artists, that's 0.0025% of the reproductions. One particular institution [which he failed to mention] had a slide library with over 20,000 slides of American Art and only 40 of those images were of works of African-American artists, 0.0020%, slightly lower but still significant disparity on what was available (Clements, 1978). There is a genuine disconnect in students wanting to know the significant contributions that are made by African-American artists but they are not included in the basic curriculum of the schools.

Brown v. Board of Education, although it provided for the desegregation of the schools it did not call for the merging of the cultures. Most of the cultural aspects of African-Americans were lost with the integration of the schools as their heritage was not considered important to be taught in the schools. The significance of The Negro Movement at times was minimized to a paragraph in textbooks when it is mentioned alongside American Art. Clements (1978) says that the minorities, not just African-Americans, rebel against the arts in this country because they are no longer exposed to it:

To a minority of our students, art becomes a "whitewash." To them, art seemingly represents the response of white artist, at best a reflection of the experience of all men but in a white mirror. For the black student, it may well be the vision of a world devoid of unrelated to the experience of black people (p. 255).

Many African-American art educators took it upon themselves to expose their students to the arts outside of the classroom; in essence they expanded their pedagogy. They would embrace their white counterparts in hopes of gaining a relationship to foster better opportunities for their

students. They used these expanded chances to grant exposure to other programs where students could fill the missing void left by traditional schooling. Aaron Douglas and Hale Woodruff were proficient in doing such as they opened their doors for their students to form networks with artist, school administrators and philanthropist so they could explore and prepare to have a new generation of African-American artists in a racially integrated society (Bey, 2011).

Teachers of all races play an intricate role in addressing the social issues that flood our schools. It is primarily the teacher's role to examine the conflicts and council with the students so that have a mutual understanding. As art teachers, we have a unique pedagogy in that we are afforded the opportunities to unlock creativity and allow students to openly express themselves, just as Viktor Lowenfeld did at Hampton Institute. He was not of African descent nor did he even know of any African-Americans before he sought political freedoms from Austria. He did make it his duty to understand the plight of African-Americans in this racially tense filled country. Through art he was able to assist in overcoming the cultural barriers that existed in Virginia while giving birth to one of the most dynamic and vibrant African-American art collections in the world. Expanded pedagogies practices reveal the untold histories of African-American art education. It is an extreme shift in conventional thought and ideology of art education to have African-American at the forefront of arts curriculum. The purpose would not be to minimize one ethnic group or another, but to find commonality; there lies the challenge that faces our educational institutions.

When the question is posed: Where are all of the black ArtTeachers? The number of Black teachers is declining and declining fast, it is not for the lack of degree programs that are available to train teachers. It is the decline in funding for teachers. In 2011, the public schools in New York City, had a budget shortfall and in an effort to shrink that deficit, there was a decision

to lay off 4,100 teachers, more specifically 350 art teachers. “When you look at those numbers, it paints a really dismal picture,” said Doug Israel, the director of research and policy for The Center of Arts Education. “These cuts mean you’re more or less giving up on the arts” (Phillips, 2011). That is just an example in New York City, across this country 3.7 million people consider themselves teachers of that number 9.3% or roughly 344,100 classify themselves as African-American or Black (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012). If this is the art mecca of the world where the “value” the arts, what is happening in other locales across the country. This causes a concern as those numbers are not in alignment with the growing population of African-American students in k-12 environments.

Traditionally art instruction has been by middle class white Americans. With that being said, there is a definite necessity to embrace a more fluent multicultural art education curriculum. A curriculum that is rich in an environment where all races, classes and genders are involved. The cultures and experiences of all the students should be introduced.

Does race really matter to teach the arts? Viktor Lowenfeld said no, as long as the needs of the student population are met and that both the teacher and students can embrace the differences that are apparent. So the better question now is, “Where are all of the Viktor Lowenfeld’s?”

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