

200 Years of African American Art



The Arthur Primas Collection

Essay by P. Stephen Hardy
“200 Years of the Black Experience in Art”

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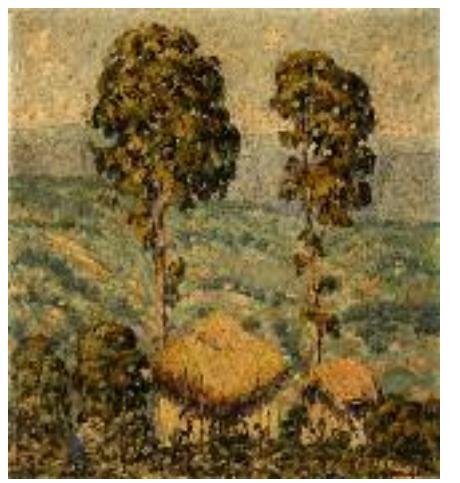
"History lives. It lives in the people."



Grafton Tyler Brown (1841-1918)
Along The Columbia, 1874
Oil on canvas



Edward Mitchell Bannister, (1828-1901)
Lazy Day, 1893
oil on canvas



Aaron Douglas, (1899-1979)
Haitian Scene, 1938
Oil on canvas

The Arthur Primas Collection is a taut balance of galvanizing content and brilliantly executed imagery. It contains a common thread, weaved through a variety of artistic mediums and movements, across 200 years of fine art practice. It is also unique among collections of predominantly African American art, which, most often, attempt to provide a survey of African American artistic production. The focus here is on works that examine the nature and impediments to freedom. This theme is at once central to American identity and to the universal quest of humankind. We are reminded by this collection that the social is at the same time intensely personal and universal. This unifying principle is broad enough to include a surprising range of works and artists.

Known primarily as landscape artists, Grafton Tyler Brown (1841-1918) and Edward Mitchell Bannister (1828-1901) were both born as free Blacks in the North East - Bannister in Canada and Brown in Pennsylvania. Brown is considered to be the first professional African American artist in California. He arrived in the mid-1850s, while slavery was still the law in the Southern United States, and set up a thriving business as a commercial draftsman.

Grafton Tyler Brown witnessed the expansion that transformed the nation. He recorded it with illustrations of burgeoning gold-rush towns, sprawling ranches, farms and country sides, that called people of all walks of life westward. His documentation of the areas surrounding San Francisco became part of the lure of the west for those in the eastern and southern states, hungry for a new way of life. Unfortunately many of those who came west brought their prejudices with them. The original oil painting, *Along the Columbia*, 1872, is likely an early landscape work. Brown was not trained as an oil painter and did not truly devote himself to landscape painting until he headed north to Canada in 1882. He sought greater racial tolerance than could be found in and around San Francisco, California. This painting is emblematic of three essential American themes of the 19th century - discovery, exploration and settlement.

Brown often included allusions to trains and railroads in his landscape compositions. The train holds many symbolic meanings from the intrusion of civilization on the perfection of God's wilderness, to the hopeful opportunity presented by travel away from the limitations of city and rural southern life. As Brown was a free Black from Pennsylvania, it is also possible that his use of trains may have been a reference to the Underground Railroad. The Underground Railroad was an interracial organization of abolitionists who provided ways and means for enslaved Africans to escape north to Canada and to the free territories in the west. Works by these early, accomplished masters were seen as a great source of racial pride, and a harbinger of what Blacks would achieve when the nation opened the doors to opportunity.

The oil painting, *Lazy Day*, 1893, by Bannister is an excellent example of the Hudson River School of painting. That style envisioned the American landscape as a pastoral setting of harmony. It presented a hopeful, optimistic belief in the potential for peaceful co-existence of human beings and nature. It is not difficult to image the lure of such an ideal, for a mixed-race man like Bannister who had been an active Abolitionist in Boston, Massachusetts. His mother was of Scottish descent and his father came from Barbados, the easternmost island in the Caribbean. Bannister was the first African American artists to win a national award for his work, the first prize bronze medal at the 1876 Centennial Exposition held in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Also of note is an extremely rare, impressionistic Haitian countryside scene painted in 1938 by Aaron Douglas (1899-1979), master muralist of the Harlem Renaissance. Douglas, more than any other artist of the Harlem Renaissance era, roughly 1914 to 1933, envisioned a direct link between ancestral Africa and modern African Americans. His book illustrations helped to transform the prevailing, stereotypical

image of Blacks in the early Twentieth Century. In this landscape we see a striking departure from his signature, ultra modern, tribal-cubist synthesis of African and African American history. The essence, however, remains firmly in tune with his desire to distill the dignity and richness of Black life in visible form.

The island nation of Haiti stands as a living symbol of a self-liberated, Black-run country, the first such in the Western Hemisphere. An island of hope for the millions of enslaved Africans and oppressed free Blacks. European artists represented Haitians as barbaric murderers and the Haitian quest for self-determination as an affront to the natural order of life. Douglas' scene shows simple beauty, honest work, and the harmony of humanity and nature. It resonates with a feeling akin to Bannister's work of some 35 years prior.

The collection includes signature works from the brothers, Beauford Delaney, (1901-1979) and Joseph Delaney, (1904-1991). Each of them departed from the prevailing genres of realism of the 1930s and 40s in favor of their own visions of life. Beauford's *Portrait of Carolyn Davis, Poet*, 1945, exhibits the influence of Van Gogh and the liberated palette of expressionism. He rendered his images with exaggerated forms and brilliant contrasts of non-natural colors. Beauford's vision depicts a world distorted by the extreme pressures of society, emotion and competing ideologies. His explorations pushed him toward abstraction, though he resisted being classified as an abstract artist.

Joseph Delaney's works recall the brothers' upbringing as sons of a Methodist minister. He often chose biblical scenes as his subjects as seen in the painting, *Last Supper*, circa 1940s. Like Beauford, Joseph used exaggeration of the physical form and non-natural colors but he expressed a more serene and simplified vision, without the energetic brushwork employed by Beauford. Joseph Delaney's Christ, in the center of the piece, seems more spirit than flesh. He glows with an inner light that recalls the luminous, biblical tableaus of Henry Ossawa Tanner. This also serves to highlight the act of reaching for the bread, an allusion to the offering of the body and blood of Christ for the salvation of all humankind.

The renowned figurative painter Jacob Lawrence (1917-2000) is best known for his series of paintings that retold major events in Black history, including the liberation of Haiti led by Toussaint L'Ouverture in 1790s. Lawrence's celebrated Toussaint L'Ouverture series was completed when he was 21 years old, in 1938, and is the result of meticulous research on his part. We can see in images such as in his screenprint, *To Preserve Their Freedom*, 1986, one of the 41 panels from the L'Ouverture series, what Lawrence called his "dynamic cubism". This work was originally painted in egg-tempura paint on paper 1937-1938. He later printed the series in a slightly larger screenprint format.

Lawrence was not interested in romantic, idealized portrayals produced as a balm against racist stereotypes so prevalent at that time. His representations were reduced to the bare essentials with overlapping, hard-edged shapes reminiscent of Henri Matisse. His figures, frozen in silhouette and posed in Egyptian-like stances, powerfully conveyed the human drama of oppression and hard-won freedom. Lawrence strove to relate those stories with straightforward honesty, and therein lay their power.

There is much to celebrate in this collection. There are examples of seminal works from artists whose importance to the canon of African American art can not be overstated. James Amos Porter (1903-1970) is represented with two works in this exhibition. He is equally important for his contribution as an artist and his contribution as a historian. His scholarship earned him the title, "the Dean of Afro-American Art History," from his colleagues and students. Porter was the first scholar to offer a systematic, critical assessment of African American artists and their works. His groundbreaking book, "Modern Negro Art", published in 1943 is still essential reading for those who seek to understand African American art practice. Porter was determined to document and place Black artists' works within the wider context of American fine art production.

Porter's most celebrated works consist of beautiful portraits and iconic figures, the painting, *Man With Ukulele*, 1957, like his charcoal drawing, *Mother and Child/Monumental Mother*, 1944, present Black individuals as larger-than-life metaphors of strength and resilience against the ominous backdrop of the times they inhabit. The subjects fill up the picture frame and eclipse the backgrounds of shadow laden color and stormy skies, respectively.



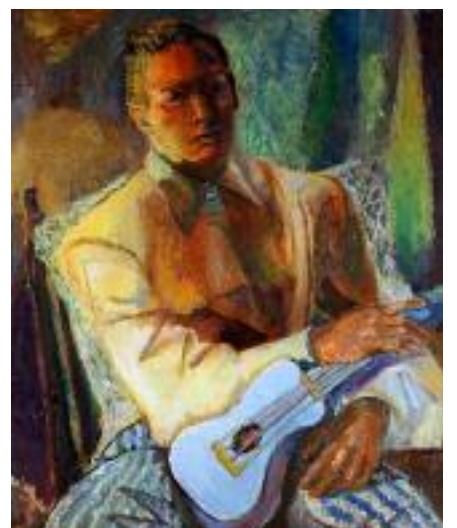
Beauford Delaney (1901-1979)
Portrait of Carolyn Davis, Poet, 1945
Oil on canvas



Joseph Delaney (1904-1991)
Last Supper. c.1940
Oil on canvas



Jacob Lawrence (1917-2000)
To Preserve Their Freedom, 1986
Screenprint



James Amos Porter (1903-1970)
Man With Ukulele, 1957
Oil on board



John Biggers (1924-2001)
Upper Room, 1984
Lithograph

Courtesy of the Biggers Trust, Houston, TX

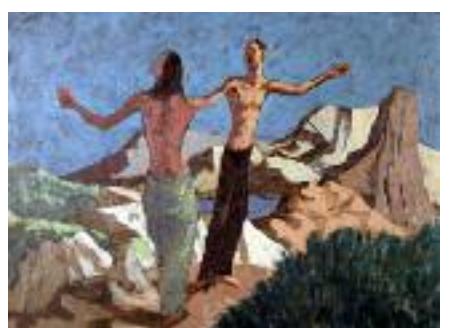
The legendary John Biggers (1924-2001) inspired generations of artists with works that abound in symbolic imagery and carefully crafted details. The image in the lithograph, *Upper Room*, 1984 proved to be extremely popular and was mass produced and consumed in the form of posters and lower end prints for many years. The “upper room” is a reference to the place where the last supper was held. Joseph Delaney’s depiction, discussed earlier, included Jesus and his disciples seated at dinner. Biggers’ interpretation re-casts that auspicious room as a shotgun house. The house is carried on the heads of two southern Black women in the manner that African women carry water home from the river. They hold the structure in place with their large, strong, worker’s hands.

Biggers depicted a bedroom rather than a dining room with a table. He furnished it with a bed whose covers are made and is presented with a sense of waiting for someone. Above the bed a window is set. Its wooden glazing bars, which hold the four panes of the window in place, evoke a cross. This may be read as the sanctification of a matrimonial bed. This reading is further strengthened as there are two chairs on the porch, one to either side of the doorway, for husband and wife to sit upon and commune with neighbors and passersby.

In brief, the upper room/shotgun house, elevated and carried on the backs, so to speak, of the strong, southern woman is the keystone that holds together the past and future of African descended peoples. Biggers’ *Upper Room* may be read as a tribute to both the marital union and hearth that served to revitalize and rejuvenate individuals and generations through the hard days of oppression and the unseen trials yet to come. We could regard this as his tribute to the bonds that act as savior to a hard-pressed race. We can also follow the metaphor to the implications of the fruits of this blessed union of man and wife.



Romare Bearden (1911-1988)
Mecklenburg Autumn, 1979
Lithograph
Art © Romare Bearden Foundation
Licensed by VAGA, NY, NY



Hughie Lee-Smith (1915-1999)
Dancing on a Dune, 1949
Oil on masonite

artists who's weight and stature continue to escalate, focused their attention on the psychological effects of America.

Hughie Lee-Smith, like Elizabeth Catlett and Charles White, saw an amazing breadth of American history first-hand – the Harlem Renaissance Jazz Age, the Great Depression, World War II, the Cold War with communist Russia, the Civil Rights Movement and Reaganomics. He developed a unique blend of surrealist or magical realist approach to convey hard-hitting social commentary. Lee-Smith's frozen tableaus present as simple scenes in desolate landscapes but unfold slowly before the viewers' eyes as layers of meaning become visible.

Navy Sailor, 1944 recalls Lee-Smith's service in the Navy during World War II. Here we have an early work that showcases Lee-Smith's ability to convey deep feeling with a minimum of visual forms. The Black sailor who returned from the “war for freedom overseas,” revealed in his body language the stark realities he came home to in segregated America. Note the chair in which the man sits. It is a grade student's chair which calls to mind the designation, “boy.” Black males were called boy regardless of their age or professional attainment, as a reminder of their subordinate “place” in American society. This work typifies Lee-Smith's 1940s works which featured alienated youth.

Dancing on a Dune, 1949 begins to show elements of Lee-Smith's mature work. He did not feel obligated to create works that exclusively depicted the bodies of African Americans. Whether Blacks are overtly present or not, the figures he employed approached the sensibility of the Black experience which mirrored the sense of isolation and emotional distance felt in industrial nations worldwide. Dancing is an act that calls for solid, firm footing. These dancers are balanced on the edge of shifting sand with jagged rocks on the left and a small area of scrubby, dark grass on the right that appears neither soft nor inviting. Though grasping each other's right hand, the couple is not engaged with each other. The man regards the woman but she is fixated on something off to the left. They lean away from each other which forms a dynamic tension between them. Their arms, outstretched for balance, almost appear to gesture toward opposite directions, perhaps symbolizing different goals or perspectives. This typifies what has been described as his ability to convey a sense of both closeness and remoteness between his figures and the landscapes they inhabit.

Pindell's lyrical, abstract canvases attract viewers from across the gallery floor. They entice with color, movement and emotion. Up close, however she expresses the double consciousness of the American condition with insightful text, found objects and collage. Her mother's death in 1991 sent her on an exploration of the theme of memorials. *Slavery Memorial/Narratives*, 1988-1989, a monumental work nearly eight feet wide and six feet tall, is representative of the power and sense of awe in that series.

Our assumptions about our world today, our shared American history, racial pathology, and the very substance of freedom itself are under examination on the gallery walls. The Primas collection pushes social and political issues at a crucial moment in our country's history. Where we go from here, as individuals and as a nation, depend entirely upon our willingness to face ourselves and our habits of relating to each other.

Two remarkable giants whose works directly address these issues are Elizabeth Catlett (1915-) and Charles White (1918-1979). They enjoy places of prominence in this collection with more than fourteen works, between them, represented here. Their long careers bridged the distance between the reportorial approach of the Social Realists and the strident indictments of the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s. Both were intensely concerned with issues of social justice and equality. Coincidentally, the two were married for a time in the 1940s. In large part, it is the unique presentation and the emotional power in both Catlett and White's oeuvres that make their work so valuable. They speak eloquent volumes on the human costs of inequality, lack of opportunity, and the power brokering of the privileged classes.

Catlett's smooth surfaced, modernist-styled sculptures seem calculated to subvert the modernist tradition from within. She located the Black body firmly within the canon of representations that could stand as universal humanity. In sculptures such as *Torso*, 1978/1990/2000 and *Stargazer*, 1990s/2000, she supplanted the notion of a lily white woman or man as the “everyman.” These seemingly gentle, soft-spoken works are in sync with, and at the same time in sharp contrast to, potent lithographs



Hughie Lee-Smith (1915-1999)
Navy Sailor, 1944
Oil on canvas



Howardena Pindell (1943-)
Slavery Memorial/Narratives, 1988-1989
Mixed media on canvas



Elizabeth Catlett (1915-)
Torso, 1978/1990/2000
Black marble



Charles White (1918-1979)
Freeport Columbia, 1946
Ink and charcoal drawing



Charles White (1918-1979)
J'accuse #2, 1965
Charcoal on board



Charles White (1918-1979)
Wanted Poster #5, 1969
Oil wash on board



Robert Colescott, (1925-)
Tobacco: The Holdouts, 1987
Acrylic on canvas

such as *The Torture of Mothers*, 1970-2003. The latter relates both the physical and emotional ramifications of living where Black life is not valued. These works speak to the wide range of Black thought on race in the 1970s and stood alongside the Blaxploitation images of African American life on the silver screen to lend a broader view of the African American condition.

Charles White's contribution to American art practice is monumental. He is, arguably, America's greatest visual critic in the realm of social justice and race relations. His career spanned some fifty years, as both teacher and artist who lived and worked on both the east and west coasts. This exhibition boasts ten works that exhibit not only his superb draftsmanship but also the inner fire that fueled his practice. White, amazingly, was able to depict both the depth of pain and the indomitable power inherent in the lives of Black folk. Some of his most important works are in this exhibition.

In 1951, White traveled with his wife through Europe. He found that his work was widely known and well received. France, Germany, Italy, Poland, Czechoslovakia, even the Soviet Union received the Whites as honored guests. Charles White was amazed by the freedom from race prejudice he experienced there. This reception may have put him in mind of others who, like he, had received wide acclaim and recognition overseas while enduring racial hatred and discrimination at home.

The Fisk school (now Fisk University) Jubilee Singers were the first to blaze a trail of appreciation of the artistic gifts of African Americans to receptive American and European audience in the early 1870s. The Jubilee Singers seven-year tour raised money to save Fisk from closing and paid for new buildings on campus. They sang Negro Spirituals, the secret songs that breathed strength and hope into the lives of enslaved Americans. The singers re-valued the contributions of African Americans for a world that thought Blacks had given nothing of value to world culture. Eighty years later, Charles White's painting, *Gospel Singers*, 1951, (pictured on the cover) pointed to the enduring importance of church music in shoring up the spirit and strength of an embattled race. It is an uncommon, full-colour piece as White's tuberculosis precluded him from working in oils. In this work, the performers are not playing towards the viewer as an audience. Rather, they are playing, in a church, for themselves. The man and woman face, play and sing to each other. In other words, the liberating force of Gospel music is not so much for those who witness the act but rather for those who take part in this revitalizing, creative activity.

J'accuse #2, 1965 is a drawing by White that depicts heads only, arranged in a rising, twisting column. The heads stare out in a silent, monumental denunciation of the systems of slavery and Jim Crow that took their lives. Here, White forces the viewer to recognize the individuality and distinctly human qualities of the millions of lives lost, without redress, through the faces of nine individuals.

Charles White happened upon slavery-era "wanted" posters depicting runaway slaves and a reward for their capture. This inspired one of his most sought after and, subsequently, difficult to acquire sets of works, the Wanted series. His painting, *Wanted Poster #5*, 1969, in this exhibition, does not simply recount the painful past, it brings that past forward to the present. Three female heads grace this canvas. The one in the center stares boldly at the viewer through slitted eyes – proud, accusing, challenging. The two at the right and left face each other and there is a date above each of their heads. On the left is printed, 1619, on the right, 19?? We could gather from this that there are those whose business it is to recapture the escaped.

For the most part, Social Realists pointed to the problems in American society, acting as objective observers. In contrast, Charles White went beyond reporting and presaged the backlash sentiment of the 1960s Black Power Movement. His imagery demanded action - self-reliant action. White's drawing, *Freeport Columbia*, 1946, exemplified that new, strident stance in visual imagery.

There is a decidedly different dynamic in the canvases of Robert Colescott. His biting humor, scathing irony and insistence on pushing forward the practice of pure painting, rather than rely on adding text, collage or other materials have earned his designation as one of Americas foremost painters, post WWII. His work *Tobacco: The Holdouts*, 1987, is especially telling. Colescott relates that any form of captivity, seen here through the lens of nicotine addiction, cannot be confined to racial or even social class. It affects all, equally. Anyone can be "caught up" and expend their lives in that ill-fated condition.

A rare find included in this exhibition is the suite of prints, ca. 1948, published by the Graphic Workshop under the title, *Negro: USA*. These exceptional black and white lithographs, woodcut, and linocut prints were created specifically for this suite and have not been published elsewhere. It includes potent imagery by artists little known today as well as striking works by Charles White and Jacob Lawrence.

For many American artists, as it was for Spain's brilliant Francisco Goya, Social Realism provided fertile ground to speak directly to the public about the injustices and needs of the day. White's dynamic print, from the *Negro: USA* portfolio, *Our War*, for example, pointed out that the war for freedom overseas, took attention off our own freedom battlefronts here at home. The realities addressed by these artists transcend time. They speak to issues as ripe for discussion and action today as they were sixty, a hundred, or two hundred years ago.

Frederick Douglass, the very image of self-determination, who stole himself away from 'master' and created his own destiny, is handled twice in the exhibition. We see him, from one perspective, as an older man looking back over his years and battles from the cover of *Harpers Weekly*, 1883. It is a sober, introspective Douglass we view there, two years after publishing his revised autobiography, "Life and Times of Frederick Douglass".

In Charles White's etching from 1973 however, Douglass' expression evokes feelings of betrayal. His hair is parted in the fashion he wore as a young man. Yet, he has neither the smooth chin of his youth nor the full beard of later years. Instead he sports a thick, full goatee - as though, visually, to inhabit the years between the fire of his youth and the calm, retrospect of his later years. Visions of our heroes reflect our times and our attitudes – 1883 Harper's and 1973 White.

This collection is not about preserving cultural traditions or even about taking political stands. It is about social realities, past and present. It is an opportunity to examine what they mean for us now as we point our steps anew toward the elusive goal of freedom and equality for everyone.

Alone, each of the works included in this exhibition makes a powerful artistic statement. Primas' eye is scalpel sharp for what is true, meaningful and well executed in visual art. Taken together, these works form bridges for us to consider and dialogue on issues that are integral to our society's continual growth and development.

The debate may be framed on the gallery walls, but it is in our daily lives that these struggles are acted out. This collection has gathered, visually, 200 years of Black representation in the Americas. It takes as a start, the emergence of a self-determined Haiti in 1804 (and, by extension, its internationally orchestrated demise). This potent drama – a universal quest for freedom versus a privileged position of denial – is placed squarely in front of today's museum visitor who has President Obama in the White House and asks, "Where do we go from here?"

We truly are history. History lives through us – our beliefs, our actions and our failure to act when we should. Engaging with art can help us move from unexamined, entrenched positions to dialogue. From there anything is possible.

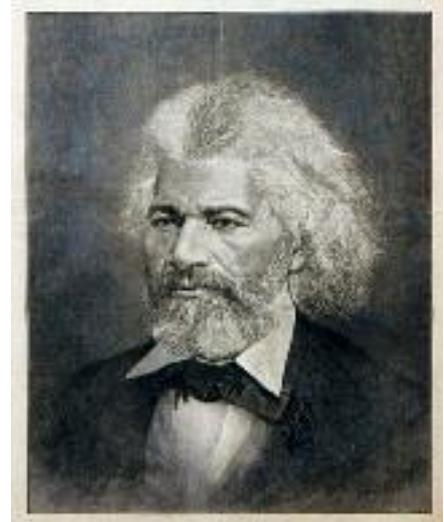
*"The art can bring us all together and create dialogue – open up the mind.
It's a safe place to discuss - in the art gallery."*

- Arthur Primas

Copyright 2010 P. Stephan Hardy. Mr. Hardy is the award-winning co-author, along with his wife Sheila J. Hardy, of "Extraordinary People of the Harlem Renaissance", Scholastic 2000 and "Extraordinary People of the Civil Rights Movement", Scholastic, 2006. He is a self-taught visual artist and former Program Manager-History, curator and educator for the California African American Museum, Los Angeles, California. He is a self-described griot, storyteller and history keeper, whose mission is to inspire people with the lessons and stories of our shared history and culture. He resides in Los Angeles, California with his wife and son.



Charles White (1918-1979)
Our War, from *Negro: USA* portfolio,
c.1948,
Lithograph



Frederick Douglass
Harpers Weekly Magazine Cover, 1883



Charles White (1918-1979)
Frederick Douglass, 1973
Etching

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The exhibition "200 Years of African American Art: The Arthur Primas Collection" is part of a very special season of entertainment and cultural activities presented by the Irving Arts Center and the Irving Black Arts Council.

The focus of the season is a celebration of the creativity, passion and artistry of the 1920s and the 1930s cultural movement known as the Harlem Renaissance. It kicked off with a touring production of *To Kill a Mockingbird* and continues with *Dreaming the Duke* on Feb. 19 and concluding with the *Langston Hughes' Project – Ask Your Mama: 12 Moods for Jazz* on April 16. Other activities have included the exhibition "Faces of the Harlem Renaissance: Photographs by Carl Van Vechten" featuring photogravures of prominent artists, writers, musicians and intellectuals on loan from the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture and a free performance by Tapestry Dance Co. in *The Souls of Our Feet: A Celebration of American Tap Dance*.

The Irving Arts Center staff has arranged for the loan of several seminal works of art from the Harlem Renaissance era from the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, the New York Public Library to supplement the already stunning collection of Mr. Primas. These loans include paintings by Aaron Douglas, Charles Alston, Palmer Hayden, Malvin Gray Johnson and Archibald Motley along with important sculptures by Selma Burke, Meta Warrick Fuller and Augusta Savage. These additional works of art brilliantly flesh out that vibrant and influential period of American art.

Special thanks for making this exhibition possible are extended to the Irving City Council, the Irving Arts Board, Richard Huff, Executive Director of the Irving Arts Center; Colvin Gibson and the Irving Black Arts Council; Charlotte Sherman, The Heritage Gallery, Los Angeles, CA; Jeffrey Landau, Landau Traveling Exhibitions; Mr. Arthur Primas; and Tammi Lawson, curator of the Art & Artifacts Division of the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Library.

For more information about the Harlem Renaissance season at the Irving Arts Center, visit www.IrvingArtsCenter.com or www.IrvingBlackArts.com

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

As Curator of the Arthur Primas Collection I am very pleased to see the collection being made available for the public to view through this exhibition and the national museum tour. We would like to thank the following individuals for their contributions to the exhibition: Victor Parra, Vincent Price Art Gallery, East Los Angeles College, Monterey Park, CA; P. Stephan Hardy for his insightful essay; Sheila Hardy; Jeffrey Landau, Landau Traveling Exhibitions; Lorry Sherman; Marcie Inman, Director of Exhibitions and Educational Programs, Irving Arts Center, Irving, TX.

Charlotte Sherman, The Heritage Gallery, Los Angeles CA

Cover Image:
Charles White (1918-1979)
Gospel Singers, 1951
Tempera on board

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