
Art Review

Perceived by Others: African Americans in American Art

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Art Review Editor

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From September 2009 until January 2010, the New York State Museum in Albany presented an exhibition entitled *Through the Eyes of Others: African Americans & Identity in American Art*. This traveling collection, on loan from the Fenimore Art Museum in Cooperstown, New York, was curated by Director Gretchen Sullivan Sorin, Distinguished Professor in Cooperstown Graduate Program.

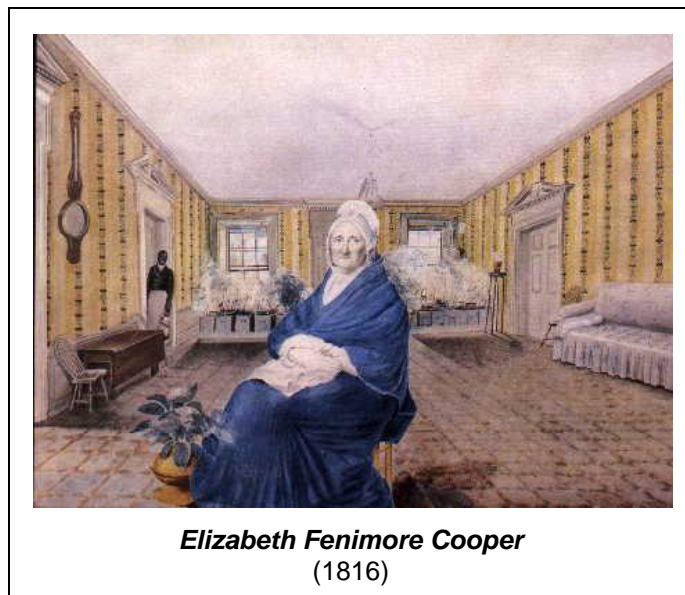


Black Child
Phillip Tilyard
(ca 1815-1825)

Thirty works of art in the exhibition include oil paintings, photographs, sculpture, woodcarvings, watercolors, woodcuts, quilts, metal toys, and ceramics from the 18th through the 21st centuries. The styles range from folk art by unknown artists to contemporary works by famous White and African American artists. Most of the paintings are by lesser known artists such as Phillip Tilyard (1785-1830), whose 1825 portrait entitled *Black Child* is the center piece of the exhibition. The painting is a dignified representation of a young Black person of unknown status with a crisp white mantle. Other artists include Charles King (1785-1862), James Clonney (1812-1867), Tompkins Matteson (1813-1884), Edward Henry (1841-1919), Norman Rockwell (1894-1978), Hale Woodruff (1900-1980), Elizabeth Catlett (born 1915), Faith Ringgold (born 1930), Whitfield Lovell (born 1959), and Lorna Simpson

(born 1960). These art works have a unified theme which poses disturbing questions about the artistic depiction of Blacks in America over 300 years and society's perspective of African American identity.

The two and three dimensional images raise the sensitive and painful issues of slavery, segregation, prejudice, discrimination, and racism in America. The exhibition focuses on how others perceived and portrayed African Americans in a society that enslaved and segregated them, their relatives, and their children. Works by contemporary African American artists express individual and collective voices, demanding an answer to a question why they were denied equality, human dignity, civil rights, and respect during social struggles against racism which continues even today.



Elizabeth Fenimore Cooper
(1816)

centered with a potted flower at her side, like a house pet. Leaning on a door sill in the background, like a decoration, is a smiling Black servant or slave. The servant was included as if he were an accessory, a fixture similar to the Federal period banjo clock or the orange plants under the sitting parlor windows.

By the end of the 17th century, the legal, economic, and social status of Blacks was determined by race. The terms slave, Black, Negro, and Colored represented a permanent class of slavery. After the American Revolutionary War (1776-1783), when White freemen were declared equal, their wives and daughters were free but not equal. Whites had freedom, while most African Americans were trapped in the vestiges of slavery. To justify morally relegating Blacks to the permanent status of property, Christians segregated their churches, keeping White souls from mixing with

Depictions of African Americans – Slaves & Servants

In the 16th century, thousands of Europeans and Africans arrived in the New World as economic slaves known as indentured servants. Folk art paintings in the exhibition depict Blacks and Whites working together as indentured servants. An 1816 watercolor of Elizabeth Fenimore Cooper, mother of the author James Fenimore Cooper, in her Cooperstown home radiates an eerie surrealistic sense of co-dependence. Mrs. Cooper loved plants and sits



William Whipper
William Matthew Prior
(ca.1835)

Blacks who came from Africa.

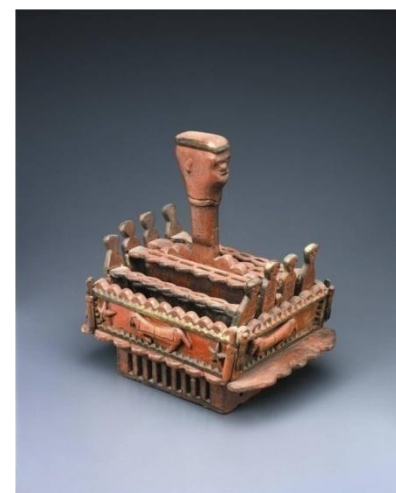
Most Blacks were slaves or servants, but there were exceptions. William Whipper of Philadelphia, PA, was a prominent Black businessman and abolitionist who had his portrait painted in 1835, showing a confident and established figure in a prosperous community.



Cigar Store Figure
Job, Wood, & Store
(ca. 1850)

With the exception of a few artworks, the exhibition reinforces how stereotypical personalities and images were replicated and affixed to Blacks. Art was a tool of political and social education to inform Whites, whose interaction with Blacks was always the superior to the inferior, that the two groups should be permanently separated. Intermarriage was prohibited. American folk culture and its limited mass media, books, and newspapers assigned negative characteristics to African Americans. Slave behavior was described and depicted as childlike, docile, ignorant, and primitive, rendering it

harmless. These imposed insensitive and immature characteristics gave Whites a rationale for treating Blacks, free or slaves, in a paternalistic manner as one would control a loyal pet or a beast of burden. Many of the exhibition's artworks and functional objects contain a mixture of African folk art and European culture. The stereotypical tobacco store tribal maiden, part of the trade figure genre, was a Black female without feathers holding a roll of cigars while standing on a barrel of rum. There are strong elements of African art in the sensual pose, and her complexion confirms that she is Black, perhaps mixed but not an Indian maiden. Another example of African American art was a common kitchen knife box. The container was ornately carved with an African head and neck as its handle and eight rows of slaves tightly packed in a box representing a slave ship with rippling ocean waves as decorative fringes. The markings and symbols on the box reflect African wood carving patterns and images.



Knife Box
Anonymous
(ca. 1850)

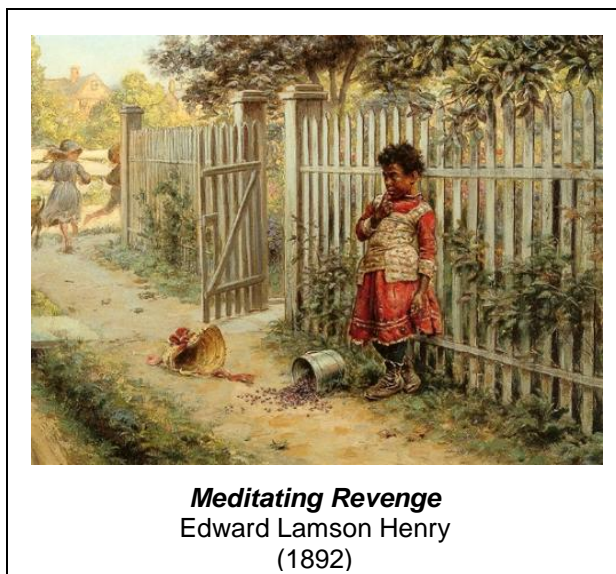
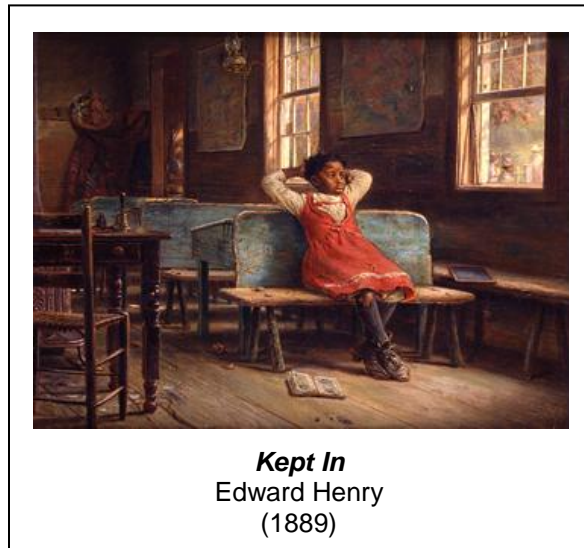
After slavery was abolished in 1865 with the 13th Amendment, Blacks entered the era of *Jim Crow* beset by separate but equal contradictions. Black faces and bodies were exaggerated in different art forms, giving them elongated ape-like limbs, frozen vacant eyes, simple expressions, and foolish grins. They remained largely children who could only function under the supervision or care of superior Whites. Newspaper and magazine writers used negative terms when referring to Blacks, and these articles reinforced anti-Black stereotypes advocated by Social Darwinists. Many 19th- and 20th-century children's toys and games ridiculed Blacks as inferior. The 1912 wind-up toy



the *Alabama Coon Jigger*¹ showed Blacks as performers and dancers endowed with alleged natural rhythm. Reflecting and directing the popular belief of racial hierarchy, White artists expressed Black identity through an art practice which appeared to give them status and normal roles but insured that each subject lacked admirable qualities. The personal artistic expressions of White artists who painted Black daily life gave viewers ample reasons why the physical reality of race justified discrimination in America.

Ridicule and Rising Expectations

From the 1870s until the 1960s, White and Black artists struggled with contradictory images of African Americans in daily life. Blacks seeking an education were sent to inferior schools which denied their potential as students. Two of Edward Henry's 1890s paintings *Kept In* and *Meditating Revenge*² show the same Black girl in a red dress in two scenes. First, she is seated in an elementary school looking like a lazy student kept inside during recess. Later she is in front of a fence plotting revenge after her White classmates knocked her down, spilling a container of berries.



Henry's subtle but powerful message suggests that giving Blacks a public education produced few benefits except providing opportunities to strike back at Whites. The Black child found the classroom too challenging. Under Jim Crow most Blacks were permitted to learn only trades or skills performed by slaves and share-croppers, which were useful but not threatening to Whites.

A popular clay or bronze figurine of the time entitled *Uncle Ned's School* repeated the derisive term of referring to adult Black males as Uncle while showing the futility of trying to teach Blacks basic literacy and numeracy. The message was that African Americans should accept their third class status in society and



Uncle Ned's School
John Rogers
(1866)

continue to perform household tasks and unskilled labor as Uncle Ned did, shining boots and shoes.

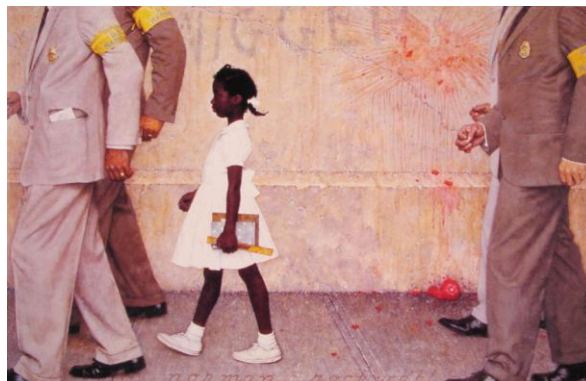
In terms of power, prestige, and privilege, an aspiring urban Black middle class who valued success and asserted themselves encountered White hostility and even the threat of lynching. The small but powerful linocut by Hale Woodruff entitled *Giddap* (1935) showed the threatening noose used to lynch “uppity Blacks.” The woodcut by



**And a Special Fear
for My Loved Ones**
Elizabeth Catlett
(1946)

Elizabeth Catlett *And a Special Fear for My Loved Ones*³ (1946) contained a similar noose. Other artworks about lynching give the exhibition with a chilling portrayal of irrational and violent racism. The images support a common belief that Blacks who were arrested were considered guilty and deserved swift punishment from a White jury or White judge. The message for Blacks was to avoid confrontation and accept White supremacy in all matters – political, economic, educational, and social.

Dignity and Self-Respect

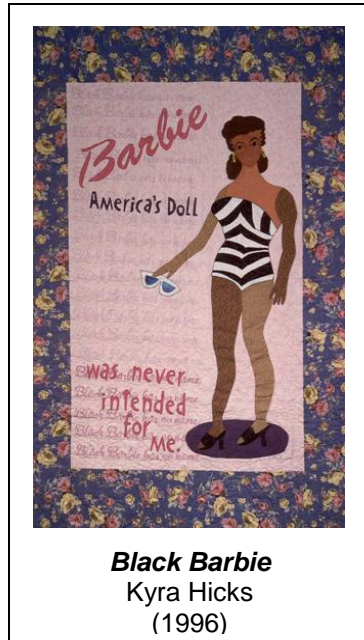


The Problem We All Live With
Norman Rockwell
(1964)

In the 20th and 21st centuries, artists of all colors and political persuasions rejected racial stereotypes and expressed their desire that America extend equality and democracy to all despite its long history of prejudice and discrimination. There were still barriers to overcome and feelings to heal, but civil and human rights were the paving stones on the road towards equity. Norman Rockwell's 1964 lithograph on paper entitled *The Problem We All Live With*⁴ captures the dignity of non-violence in the American Civil Rights Movement striving to provide equal educational

opportunities to students of color in American schools. Rockwell treated the difficult racial issues with great dignity and respect.

Ivan Massar's photograph entitled *Vote: Selma to Montgomery, Alabama*⁵ (1965) shows a young Black man demonstrating for equal voting rights in the 1965 election. His silent voice is delivered through his body. The word “vote” painted on his forehead



was more powerful than violence seeking voting rights. Kyra Hicks' quilt entitled *Black Barbie*⁶ (1996) sends a simple surface message with a deeper, more complex underlying observation that her social identity and persona were limited and constructed by others. A Black girl growing up playing with a White Barbie doll had to reject her identity in terms of beauty. Faith Ringgold's 1967 oil painting entitled *U.S. Postage Stamp Commemorating the Advent of Black Power* invited viewers to ask who was worth commemorating on a US postal stamp because Blacks were never portrayed. Ringgold expressed the cry for Black Power and an affirmation of a collective African American sense of history, pride, destiny, and power.



*Power*⁷ invited viewers to ask who was worth commemorating on a US postal stamp because Blacks were never portrayed. Ringgold expressed the cry for Black Power and an affirmation of a collective African American sense of history, pride, destiny, and power.

Conclusion



The Albany exhibition presents a striking, shocking, chilling, and shameful mixture of emotions and images, along with images of unacceptable attitudes and cruel treatment of Blacks in American history. Visitors have an opportunity to develop a better understanding of what African Americans experienced and how racial and physical features were stereotyped to justify discrimination. The unforgettable visual evidence reminds us to reflect on hundreds of years of wrongful practices, actions, and judgments about African Americans and challenges us to ensure that future generations will never allow this to happen again in American society. The exhibition presents conflicting statements about protecting peace and justice for all people. Whitfield Lovell's work, charcoal on wood with found objects, entitled *America 2000*⁸, represents his dream of equity where each person stands equal, proud, and

distinguished with knowledge about America's past which empowers them to make a better future.

Acknowledgment

We would like to acknowledge the assistance of Director Gretchen Sullivan Sorin, Distinguished Professor of Cooperstown Graduate Program, and the staff of New York State Historical Association—Paul D'Ambrosio, Vice President and Chief Curator, Michelle Murdock, Curator of Exhibitions, and John Hart, Jr., Assistant Curator of Collections of the Farmers' Museum.

The following artwork images are reproduced courtesy of the Fenimore Art Museum, Cooperstown, New York.

"Black Child," ca. 1815-1825, by Philip Thomas Coke Tilyard (1785-1830), Oil on Canvas, H 24" x W 19 ½", N0250.1961. Photograph by Richard Walker

"Elizabeth Fenimore Cooper," 1816, by George Freeman (1789-1868), Watercolor on Wove Paper, H 17 1/16" x W 22 3/8", N0145.1977. Photograph by Richard Walker

"William Whipper," ca. 1835, Attributed to William Matthew Prior (1806-1873), Oil on Canvas, H 24 ¾" x 20 1/8", N0246.1961. Photograph by Richard Walker

"Cigar Store Figure, Female (African American)," ca. 1850, Attributed to Job, Wood and Paint, H 45 ½" x W 14 ½" x D 16 ½", N0145.1961

"Knife Box," ca. 1850, Maker Unknown, Wood and Paint, H 15 ½" x W 14 x D 9 ¾", N0156.1961.

"Kept In," 1889, by Edward Lamson Henry (1841-1919), Oil on Canvas, H 13 ½" x W 18", N0309.1961. Photograph by Richard Walker

"Uncle Ned's School," 1866 (Patented), by John Rogers (1829-1904), Plaster, H 20" x W 8 ¾", D 14", N0032.1961. Photograph by Richard Walker

Image Credits

1. *Alabama Coon Jigger*, windup metal toy 10" tall (circa. 1912), made in Germany and the USA.
http://www.traunstein.de/index/verwalt/einrich/heimathaus/Spielzeugmuseum_Bewegungsspielzeuge.html

2. *Mediating Revenge* by Edward Lamson Henry, (1892) 9" x 12" oil on canvas.
<http://store.encore-editions.com/artists/ethnic1art18etnc.html>
3. *And A Special Fear For My Loved Ones* by Elizabeth Catlett, (1946), 4" x 8" linocut on cream wove paper. <http://tinyurl.com/yfj678q>
4. *The Problems We All Live With* by Norman Rockwell (1964), 15" x 11" illustration.
http://dyallo.files.wordpress.com/2009/07/rockwell_norman_the_problem_we_all_live_with_1964.jpg
5. *Vote: Selma to Montgomery, Alabama* by Ivan Massar (1965), photograph.
<http://www.ivanmassar.com/Contact.html>
6. *Black Barbie*, by Kyra Hicks (1996), 5' x 10', cotton quilt.
<http://blackthreads.blogspot.com/2009/03/barbie-turns-50-black-barbie-quilt-by.html>
7. *U.S. Postage Stamp Commemorating The Advent of Black Power* by Faith Ringgold (1967), (size unknown) mural. <http://tinyurl.com/ylgz2rt>
8. *America 2000* by Whitfield Lovell, (2003), 89" x 52" charcoal on wood with found objects.
http://www.meca.edu/Meca_Galleries/2003_Skowhegan_Faculty_Exhibition.aspx

Supplemental Materials and References

The Rise and Fall of Jim Crow

<http://www.pbs.org/wnet/jimcrow/>

Ferris State University Jim Crow Museum

<http://www.ferris.edu/JIMCROW/>

Chronology on the History of Slavery and Racism 1619-1990s

<http://innercity.org/holt/slavechron.html>

Images of Blacks in Art

<http://www.donstinson.com/scatt/artistsonline/negroportraits.html>

Jim Crow Laws – University of Dayton Law School

<http://academic.udayton.edu/race/02rights/jcrow02.htm>