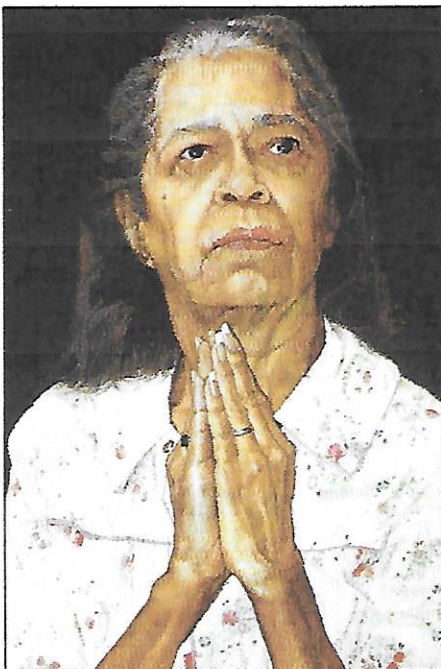
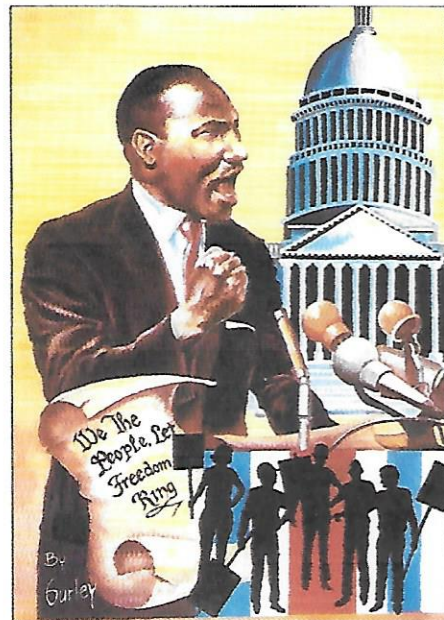


*"Together Forever" by Nigerian-born Okaybabs blends traditional African work with abstract expressionism. Enter 328 on reader service card.*



*"Miss Chuckii" by Mario Robinson is a product of his efforts to show the human side of people. Enter 329 on reader service card.*



*"Let Freedom Ring" by T. Gurley, published by Positive Black Images, emphasizes the message of Martin Luther King. Enter 330 on reader service card.*

emancipation, African-American art seems to focus on spreading messages of hope, endurance, spirituality, and self-determination.

In selecting pieces to publish, Dexter Merritt of Positive Black Images (PBI) of Gaithersburg, Maryland, says, "I think about the actual messages the art delivers, looking for positive, uplifting, inspiring pieces—those that resonate from a cultural standpoint."

The most popular images, says Merritt, are those that illustrate the importance of getting an education—something African-Americans were denied in the past. This reinforces the ideals parents and teachers are trying to instill in children. The "Success Comes in Cans" series published by PBI consists of three prints titled "I Can," "You Can," and "We Can," each using visual images to deliver a dose of inspiration. For instance, in Alix Beaujour's piece "I Can," a young man studies by the light of a kerosene lamp with a ray of light illuminating a portrait of Frederick Douglass in the background.

Double messages are also a common part of the genre. "You have to have a third eye," says Aqeela Shakur, describing how the work of her husband, Khalil Bey, should be viewed. At first glance, Bey's painting "Kinte

Women" appears to depict just two faces. But on close examination you can see three or four faces plus the figure of a dancer. The piece is about "the culture...the blackness in black women," says Shakur.

Artists and galleries call attention to black culture's appreciation of puns, jokes, and games, which function as a kind of secret language for delivering serious commentary on African-American life. In "Sea of Hats," for example, Peggy Van Buren shows a Sunday service in session. The stained-glass window blends into a sea of hats, delivering the message that you might see more woman in church these days than men. Her piece "Raining Men"—literally depicting men of various shapes and sizes falling from the sky is a tongue-in-cheek response to the contemporary complaint of many women that "there are no good men out there. People have problems, but people are taking life too seriously," says the artist.

In an era when there is a lot of discussion about the decline of the black family, it's hard to remember that "as far as a race, I think black people have a history of sticking together," says artist Mario Robinson. "A lot of artists grew up in an era when all you had was

family and community. A lot of black artists paint what they know, trying to capitalize on the positive. It may not be what they see now, but it is what they remember."

Bey's image of young African-American men do-wopping on a street corner in Philadelphia evokes the happy-go-lucky days of the past. Robinson's own positive images include a beloved family matriarch, Beulah King, and three church women "reverencing" God, each in her own way.

Religious topics are popular, says Merritt. Buyers appreciate the traditional realism of such pieces as T. Gurley's "Sunday Worship," showing people leaving an old-fashioned wooden church on the bank of a river. These works reflect a sense of nostalgia both artists and buyers feel for the world in which they grew up. "The backbones of the black community are family and religion, and the artists recognize that," observes Cory Ackerman, president of Modern Youth Masterpieces, a student-run company that seeks to foster young African-American artists.

Indeed, art has been the medium that many African-Americans have used to rediscover their heritage. "It goes without saying that we do things