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BLACK ENTREPRENEURSHIP

PRETTY PICTURE

Interest in black artists grows, drawing attention from high-profile dealers and collectors

By TERI AGINS

The following is an *excerpt* from a story done on **African-American art** in the **Wall Street Journal**

"There's an international art force that is taking over, as African-American art and primitive works from the Caribbean have been breaking through in London and Paris and all over," says Samella Lewis, a professor emeritus of art history at Scripps College, one of the Claremont Colleges in Claremont, Calif. Black art, she says, is "significant and sophisticated—socially and politically. It makes statements, and people want to buy it."

Overdue Recognition

That recognition is long overdue, collectors say. Historically, black artists worked as laborers or tradesmen while moonlighting in anonymity. They often painted socially acceptable European themes, rather than drawing on their own cultural roots. But some found patrons among liberal philanthropists, who supported and collected their work and encouraged more self-expression.

Interest in black artists began to gather steam in the late 1970s, when a number of museum shows featured black artists during America's bicentennial celebration. At the same time, such black schools as Howard University, Hampton University and Fisk University began issuing catalogs of their extensive art collections.

Comedian Bill Cosby helped pave the way for even broader acceptance, when he decided to make television's popular Huxtable family connoisseurs of African-American art. The appreciation of black art by the upper-middle-class Huxtables awakened millions of viewers to a creative tradition long ignored by established collectors and dealers.

"The boom in black art has come about not in the market of galleries or the auctions at Sotheby's and Christie's, but from ordinary black people," says David Driskell, an art-history professor at the University of Maryland and adviser to several individual art buyers, including Mr. Cosby. Among his other clients is a Washington, D.C., policeman who has collected 100 original works, and a stage hand at the Kennedy Center whose collection includes work by the noted 18th century portrait painter, Joshua Johnson. The stage hand "spends every penny he has buying works by black artists," Mr. Driskell says.

White collectors are buying as well. At recent shows at the Newark Museum in Newark, N.J., and at the Equitable Gallery in New York, Dave and Reba Williams of New York showed 150 works from their extensive collection of prints from black artists from the 1930s and 1940s. For the next three years, the Williams's prints will be on tour in museums in the U.S. and Europe, under the sponsorship of the American Federation of Art, a nonprofit group in New York.

Donations to Museums

The popularity of black artists was further fueled in the 1980s, as several white patrons of 19th- and 20th-century black art donated works to the National Museum of American Art at the Smithsonian Institution. The Harmon Foundation, one of the foremost of these benefactors of black artists from the 1920s through the 1960s, gave the Smithsonian more than 2,000 works.

Among top museums that have begun to buy and exhibit black art is New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, which currently has about 100 works by black artists in its permanent collection, most of them acquired since 1975.

Meanwhile, since the late 1970s a number of black-owned galleries specializing in black artists have opened in big cities: June Kelly Gallery and Kenkelaba Gallery in New York; Isobel Neal Gallery in Chicago and Bomani Gallery in San Francisco.

In 1992, the six-year old Isobel Neal Gallery had its best year ever. "Last year, we sold quite a few pieces over $10,000," says Charles Fabro, the gallery's director. Mr. Fabro says that the average piece sold for between $3,000 and $4,000 in 1992, about triple the average price in 1991.

Relatively Low

But while prices have risen in recent years, most specialists agree that they are still relatively low, compared with the works of traditional mainstream artists. Generations of exclusion from the best-known galleries and auction houses have held down prices and prestige.

America's foremost living black artist is Jacob Lawrence, whose paintings usually sell for no more than $75,000, according to Mr. Driskell. Works by collagist and cubist painter Romare Bearden doubled in price after his death in 1988, but they still typically sell in the $40,000-to-$60,000 range.

"The big money is yet to be made," says Ms. Lewis of Scripps. That will happen, she believes, "once critics are more broadly trained and exposed—because collectors don't buy what the critics don't approve of."

But there are exceptions. Joshua Johnson, a self-taught Baltimore artist, is recognized as the first professional black American portrait painter. His 18th-century oil painting, "Emma Van Name," depicting a white girl in a pink dress, sold for $660,000 in a Sotheby's auction in 1988.

Noted 19th-century artists include landscape painter Edward Mitchell Bannister, sculptor Edmonia Lewis, and painter Henry Ossawa Tanner. Mr. Tanner's portrait of a man and child seated at a table, "Thankful Poor," was part of the living-room set of the Cosby show. Mr. Cosby purchased the painting at a 1981 auction for $275,000.

Also currently in vogue is "outsider art"—which refers to socially noncomformist work produced by eccentrics, mental patients and other social outsiders. Among the most popular is Bill Traylor, who died in the late 1940s. Mr. Traylor, an elderly, homeless man, showed his paintings on the street. Eight years ago, a Traylor could be bought for about $200; recently one of his paintings was auctioned for $20,000. Mr. Traylor is considered "the shining ornament of Outsider Art," says Nancy Druckman, head of the American Folk Art department at Sotheby's.

(Last fall, the heirs of Mr. Traylor filed a lawsuit in a Manhattan state court accusing Charles Shannon, a white collector who once befriended Mr. Traylor, and Hisrchl & Adler Modern, a Manhattan gallery, of illegally profiting from artwork that should have belonged to Mr. Traylor's heirs.)

In terms of demand, the hottest segment of the market is for inexpensive lithographs and posters that depict all aspects of black culture. The market barely existed 10 years ago. But now, thanks to heavy promotion from black entrepreneurs such as Mr. Robertson, the market generates an estimated $20 million in sales a year.

Positive Black Images Inc., a Dallas black-owned firm, contracts with a dozen artists to produce works customized to appeal to specific black audiences, including churches, fraternities and sororities and schools. Most of these paintings and prints are reproduced and marketed as posters.

Obstacles to Acceptance

Still, despite the increased visibility, black art faces obstacles before it is fully absorbed into the mainstream art community.

For one thing, original black art is difficult to price. "The appraisal system is based on an old-boy network, ties with art schools and artists who have some kind of seniority and track record," says Mary Lanier, a New York art consultant to private collectors and corporations. Blacks, she suggests, haven't been part of that network.

Moreover, the market is thin: Relatively few works have changed hands at auction, so prices are fluid—and untested. "Because the market is new, especially for contemporary artists, there are no yardsticks," says Cheryl Sutton, a Gary, Ind., dealer. "We are making up the rules as we go along."

Howardena Pindell, a professor of art at the State University of New York at Stony Brook, did a statistical survey on museum exhibitions and New York City galleries, and found that between 1980 and 1987, nearly all of the most prestigious galleries represented only white artists. In 1987, she presented her report to the Agendas for Survival, a conference focusing on nonwhite cultures in the U.S. sponsored by Hunter College in New York. Ms. Pindell told the conference that blacks and other minority artists are "with a very few exceptions, systematically excluded." Only artists of European descent, she said, are considered by the mainstream to be "American" artists.

Nor does black art fit into auction houses' conventional thematic categories. While Sotheby's and Christie's place African art in their "tribal art" divisions, neither has a division for art by black Americans.

Inroads against exclusion are being made. A bill is currently pending in Congress to authorize a new National African American Museum at the Smithsonian in Washington D.C. The College Art Association, a nonprofit trade group in New York, will sponsor a fellowship program next fall for artists and art historians pursuing doctoral and professional degrees. The Association hopes to encourage minorities to pursue careers in the visual arts.

For the first time, the United States Information Agency recently sent five black artists to represent the U.S. at the Dakar Biennale, a major international art festival in Dakar, Senegal.

One of the major goals of the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York is to attract more minorities to the museum, according to David A. Ross, the museum's director. In 1992, the Whitney held major retrospectives of work by Edward Mitchell Bannister and primitive painter William H. Johnson. The Whitney's exhibit of Jean-Michel Basquiat, the graffiti artist who was a protege of Andy Warhol, was its best-attended show during the fall of 1992.

Mr. Basquiat, who died in 1988, was one of the hottest artists in New York during the late 1980s. His works consistently command prices higher than any black artist, living or dead. In 1990, one painting sold at a Paris auction for $567,000. ■

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