

African American Artists in the Art Institute



Untitled (1999) by Ellen Gallagher

GALLERY 291

Based in New York and Rotterdam, Holland, artist Ellen Gallagher creates large-scale works that at first appear abstract and minimal but, upon closer inspection, are full of surprising textural details. The layered surfaces reveal images of African Americans pulled from common depictions throughout the last century. Resurrecting both positive and negative stereotypes, or as the artist explains, “reactivating something that was static,” Gallagher’s work rigorously explores race and cultural identity.

In *Untitled*, Gallagher creates what she refers to as a “fantasy” rendering of an African, building up intricate patterns of rubber to indicate hair, skin, tattoos, and jewelry.



Nightlife (1943) by Archibald John Motley Jr.

GALLERY 263

After working in Paris for a short time, Archibald Motley Jr., a School of the Art Institute graduate, settled back in Chicago, drawing inspiration from the city’s neighborhoods. In this painting, Motley captured the infectious vibrations of a crowded cabaret in the Bronzeville area on the city’s South Side. As the clock

above the bar indicates, it is one in the morning, and the place is hopping with drinkers and dancers. Couples have paired off and swing rhythmically to the music blasting from the jukebox, while drinkers sidle up to the bar for another round. The energetic work beautifully depicts the vibrant fashion and vivacity of jazz joints in the 1940s.



The Boxer (1942) by Richmond Barthé

GALLERY 263

Although Richmond Barthé pursued painting while at the School of the Art Institute in the late 1920s, the Mississippi native achieved success after graduation as a sculptor in New York. His work was exhibited widely by the Harmon Foundation, an organization that promoted African American artists and writers, and earned the praise of Harlem Renaissance critic Alain Locke. Heroic depictions of African Americans—frequently elongated nudes with a rhythmic grace—became staples of Barthé’s sculpture.

The Boxer was inspired by a prizefight the artist had seen years earlier featuring the Cuban lightweight Eligio Sardiñas Montalvo, dubbed Kid Chocolate. The agility, elegance, and sensuality of the boxer’s supple physique characterize much of Barthé’s work.



Head of a Negro Woman (c. 1935)
by Sargent Claude Johnson

GALLERY 264

In 1935, around the same time that Sargent Claude Johnson created this elegant sculpture, he stated, “I aim at producing a strictly Negro art.... It is the pure American Negro I am concerned with, aiming to show the natural beauty and dignity in that characteristic lip, that characteristic hair, bearing, and manner. And I wish to show that beauty not so much to the white man as to the Negro himself.” Johnson’s approach becomes quite clear in this terracotta

work which emphasizes the woman’s full lips and broad nose—those traits he saw as racially distinctive. Yet to this naturally rendered physiognomy, Johnson added a subtle stylization culled from his study of African art such as the smooth cap of hair incised with regular notches. The blend results in a work both highly individual yet timeless and universal.



The Room No. VI (1948) by Eldzier Cortor

GALLERY 262

At a time when many American artists were exploring abstraction, Eldzier Cortor committed himself to representational art, wanting to portray subjects that were relevant to his life. Cortor painted this work while living in Chicago, and it depicts, as he later explained, “the overcrowded condition of people...in a condition of utmost poverty.” The elongated figural style recalls African sculpture, which he had studied while a student at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in the 1930s. Despite Cortor’s bleak

focus, he created a dynamic patchwork effect by dramatically cropping the figures and including a variety of patterns and colors. He thus conveyed some of the hardships of life in Chicago even as he endowed his subject with beauty and grace.



The Two Disciples at the Tomb (c. 1906)
by Henry Ossawa Tanner

GALLERY 161

The son of a prominent minister in the African Methodist Episcopal Church, Henry Ossawa Tanner became internationally renowned for his religious paintings at the turn of the 20th century. This canvas, one of Tanner’s most celebrated works, illustrates the moment from the Gospel of St. John when Peter and John find that Jesus’s body was no longer in the tomb. In Tanner’s depiction, the discovery of Christ’s resurrection can be interpreted

as a modern allegory of the salvation of African Americans from slavery. Exhibited at the Art Institute in 1906, the luminous painting was the first work by an African American artist to enter the museum’s permanent collection.

Find more works by African American artists in the special exhibitions *Modern in America: Works on Paper, 1900–1950s* through April 4 and *Heart and Soul: Art from Coretta Scott King Award Books* through April 18. And be sure to join us on April 1 at 6:00 for a reading from Nobel Prize–winning poet Derek Walcott and then again on April 3 at 12:00 for “Artists Connect: Ian Weaver Connects with Kerry James Marshall.”