

African American art and artists in the Early to Mid-Twentieth Century

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In the beginning and middle decades of the twentieth century, artists played a key role in portraying African American life and culture with a focus on the Deep South, and elsewhere in the United States. Whether through the mediums of painting, photography, film, music, and literature, the arts served as an important tool in sharing the way of life, and experiences of African Americans living in southern states during the Jim Crow and civil rights eras. Though largely unappreciated and often ignored at the time by the larger American culture, many of these artists and their work have since gained greater recognition for their influence and contribution to the arts.

Throughout American history, the influence of African Americans on art and culture has been largely ignored, discouraged, or even outlawed altogether. This continued into the twentieth century when the lives of African Americans across the country were affected by racist Jim Crow laws, discrimination, and segregation. Despite these restrictions, African American painters, sculptors, musicians, writers, and artists of all stripes continued to create and share their work. This work was heavily informed by the circumstances of discrimination and harassment they faced every day, with artists from a variety of backgrounds all working to portray the ways of life of African Americans in the twentieth century. This work was created by those who directly experienced this period, who could detail the racism and discrimination that came with life as an African American in the United States, and the effects such treatment had on them and their art.

To fully understand the context of this period, and the artwork it produced, this paper will examine four markedly different African American artists from a range of backgrounds, who worked in individual styles and explored many themes in their work. By looking at their lives and careers, as well as some selected works that capture the prominent themes and ideas that defined the art of the time, we can begin to understand their perceptions of the world around them, the history they knew, and the times they experienced.

The first is a well-known folk artist who perfectly encapsulates some of these experiences in her work, Clementine Hunter. Hunter was born, raised, and lived most of her life on a northern Louisiana plantation that served as a home for working artists. Her grandmother was a former slave, and Hunter received little schooling. She worked on the plantation from childhood and lived in northern Louisiana her entire life, miles from the plantation where she was born. A self-taught artist, Hunter began painting in her mid-fifties, initially using art supplies left behind by a visiting artist. From then on, she made thousands of paintings that varied in style, color, and theme. Hunter's artwork depicted the lives of African Americans in the Deep South at the turn of the century, ranging from work life to community interaction, and religion. Some themes reflected in her works are "work scenes from plantation life; recreation scenes from rural black life; religious scenes" (Jones, 25) but she is most known for her depictions of work on a plantation, depicting "cotton picking, the cotton cart on its way to the gin, pecan harvesting, wash days" (Jones, 25). An example of this is *Cotton Pickin'*, circa 1960s, in which we see her colorful style displaying numerous figures at work on a cotton plantation. In such scenes, Hunter shows the reality many African Americans lived.

While Clementine Hunter's work portrays the everyday lives of African Americans living in the Jim Crow South, another artist working at the same time captured the hopes, dreams, and existential questions faced by many African Americans not only in the Deep South but across the entire country. Elizabeth Catlett was born in

Washington D.C. and faced discrimination in the American education system and the art world at large. Despite educational discrimination, she worked as an art professor and lived as an ex-pat in Mexico. She lived in Mexico for the rest of her life, and its openness to political and social art had a profound impact on her work. Catlett often incorporated social and political themes into her sculptures and printmaking, ranging from early work such as her 1940 sculpture, *Mother and Child*, to her later works which were heavily influenced by her immersion into the art world of Mexico, seen in her 1970 linocut *Sharecropper*. Her early life in the United States and time spent in Mexico, surrounded by political art and artists helped introduce themes including “images of working women, urban laborers and campesinos, children working and caring for smaller children, homeless children in the city and indigenous children in the country; and African American mothers, workers, ordinary people, and historical heroines”. (Herzog, 107) Such work reflected that “Catlett firmly believed that art can raise the consciousness of injustice, expose abuses of power, and illuminate the possibilities for social transformation” (Herzog, 109).

Another popular African American artist who created well-known work around this time was Hale Woodruff. While Clementine Hunter’s work explored everyday life and experiences, Elizabeth Catlett delved into the social and political atmosphere of the day. Hale Woodruff’s work incorporated history, specifically some of the key events in the history of slavery and the relationship between African Americans and the United States government. He was part of a newer generation of African American artists in the 1920s and 30s, who “successfully resisted and broke with the tradition which avoided black subject matter”. (Cureau, 8) A prominent example of this is his 1941 mural *Trial of Amistad Mutineers*, which was part of a larger series of murals-that focused on the people and events of the Amistad, its influence on bringing to light the realities of slavery to a larger number of Americans and the lives of African Americans and United States history. This portion of Woodruff’s mural portrays the important moments of the Supreme Court case which set an important precedent for ending slavery. What would end up being a “significant verdict, which recognized the legal sovereignty of a group of abducted Africans en route to enslavement in Cuba”. (Flucker, 16) Woodruff completed the mural one hundred years after this seminal event in American history, yet despite the end of slavery, and the progress made, most African Americans still lived an existence defined by near-constant segregation and omnipresent discrimination.

The final artist is Romare Bearden, “whose social consciousness is no less intense than his dedication to art”, and “his example is of utmost importance for all who are concerned with grasping something of the complex interrelations between race, culture, and the individual artist as they exist in the United States”. (Ellison, 676). Bearden was born in North Carolina but moved with his family to New York City as a toddler and spent not only the rest of his childhood there, but the bulk of his career as a fixture in the New York art community as well. Bearden’s art, consisting primarily of paintings and eventually collages such as his 1970 piece *The Calabash*, was often rooted in his own life, with experiences ranging from semi-professional baseball player to serving in the army during the Second World War. Like Clementine Hunter, his early work depicted life in the American South and included influence from muralists who worked in Mexico. As time went on, he began to work largely in collages, the medium he is most popularly known for, and his art began to grow more abstract in its depictions. It incorporated modern and historical events, such works “embody Bearden’s interrogation of the empirical values of a society which mocks its own ideals through a blindness induced by its myth of race”. (Ellison, 680) Something which could be applied to a number of artists from the period.

Having detailed these four distinct African American artists, and the respective styles and themes their work explored, we can see how the African American experience during the early to mid-twentieth century informed and influenced the broader world of art. Through Clementine Hunter's colorful depictions of everyday work life on a southern plantation and Elizabeth Catlett's sculptures and prints conveying the social and political hopes of the time, we can glean what life was like. We may also understand the historical context in which African American artists lived at the time through the dynamic works of Hale Woodruff and Romare Bearden we too can examine that history, and how it influenced and portrayed through such art. In all four of these artists, we see how even in a time of such overt racism and segregation, African American artists made important and influential contributions to the arts as a whole.

Works Cited

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Works

Cotton Pickin', Clementine Hunter



Mother and Child, Elizabeth Catlett



Sharecropper, Elizabeth Catlett



Trial of The Amistad Mutineers, Hale Woodruff



The Calabash, Romare Bearden

