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The Academic Study of Art: Black Is a Color Almost Never Seen

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□ **The Academic Study of Art:  
Black Is a Color Almost Never Seen**

*At the nation's 27 highest-ranked universities there are more than 500 art department faculty members. Among these, no more than 10 blacks are tenured professors. At 20 of these 27 leading universities, there are no tenured art professors who are black.*

**A**frican Americans have almost no presence in the art departments of America's highest-ranked universities. Why is this so?

Much of the explanation turns on the fact that art and art history, as taught in the United States, is for the most part a discipline linked almost entirely to Western European culture. While Italian and French masters receive center stage in the academic study of art, works from Asia, Africa, and the indigenous peoples of the Americas tend to be ignored or pushed to the margins.

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*"In American works of art, typically blacks were shown as slaves, banjo-playing minstrels, or idle watermelon eaters."*

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Moreover, the large number of scholars of art in this country, almost all of whom are white, tend to hold traditional racial stereotypes. Some art department faculty, in common with many other academics, often believe that black people are ill equipped to make a serious contribution to the study of white-dominated art and the culture of Western society. This is so because the subject matter art professors deal with is exclusively the fruits of white Western culture.

Undoubtedly, too, the opinions of white art department faculty have been shaped by the way blacks traditionally have been portrayed by white artists. As the black historian Carter G. Woodson put it, the American Negro was viewed as "vacuous, animalistic, subhuman, and sterile." Throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries blatantly racist images of African Americans regularly appeared in newspaper cartoon drawings, magazine illustrations, and print advertisements. But white artists of major repute also employed the standard demeaning stereotypes. Typically, blacks were shown as slaves, banjo-playing minstrels, or idle watermelon eaters. Ralph Ellison remarked in *Invisible Man* that the Negro was portrayed in American art to evoke only two emotions, humor and pity. Harvard professor Henry Louis Gates Jr. has written: "What shocks us today about the

**African-American Artists Offered the Only Respectful Portrayals of Blacks on Canvas**



**I**n the first half of the twentieth century, one had to look to African-American artists for respectful paintings of Negroes.

This 1943 painting entitled "Jennie" is by Lois Mailou Jones. The African-American artist was born in Boston in 1905. She was one of the first black graduates of the Boston School of Fine Arts. Jones was a professor of design and painting at Howard University for more than 40 years. Her wide-ranging work includes portraits, landscapes, and black symbolism. Jones died in 1998.

paintings, drawings, and sculptures from the decades that spanned the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth is their failure to capture the full range of the African-American personality."

In *Facing History: The Black Image in American Art, 1710-1940*,\* the late historian Guy C. McElroy notes that African Americans in art were generally depicted in four forms: "grotesque buffoons, servile menials, comic entertainers, and threatening subhumans."

Examples of racial insults in American art are legion. John Lewis Krimmel's 1813 "Quilting Frolic" and William

\*San Francisco: Bedford Arts Publishers, 1990.

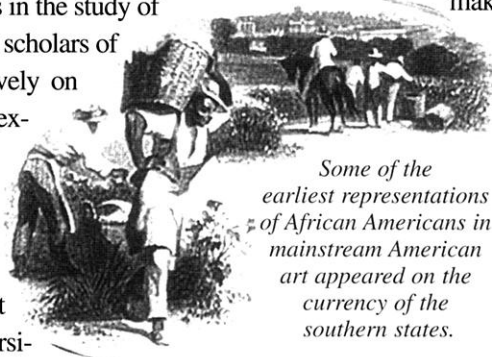
Sidney Mount's 1830 "Rustic Dance After a Sleigh Ride" show blacks as fiddling minstrels and toadying servants. The 1838 work by Charles Deas entitled "The Devil and Tom Walker" depicts the devil as having dark skin and Negroid features. James Goodwyn Clonney's 1851 "Wake Up" portrays a black man who has fallen asleep while fishing, the object of ridicule of two young whites. Typical of the period was Winslow Homer's "The Watermelon Boys" (1876). In 1934 Reginald Marsh's "Negroes on Rockaway Beach" portrayed a summer beach scene as a writhing mass of humanity seemingly engaged in a sexual orgy.

*"Ralph Ellison remarked in Invisible Man that the Negro was portrayed in American art only to evoke two emotions, humor and pity."*

Through the years African-American painters, almost without exception, were the only artists to picture blacks in a positive light. African-American artists such as Henry O. Tanner, Jacob Lawrence, Laura Wheeler Waring, and Lois Mailou Jones portrayed black folk as proud, hard-working people worthy of respect. But there were very few black artists in the United States. First of all, there was no market for their works. Black artists, unlike their white peers, were unlikely to attract patrons who would support them until they could become established in the field. For the few black artists who managed to paint, their works were not exhibited regularly at the nation's most prestigious museums. In cities, particularly in the South, the region where in the first part of the twentieth century a large majority of the black population resided, blacks were not even welcome to visit the major art museums.

Given this history it is no wonder that even today blacks are underrepresented in the academic study of art. Besides the small number of black artists, racism in the academy made it extremely difficult for black academics in the study of art to gain a toehold in the field. White scholars of art, who concentrated almost exclusively on the European masters and to a lesser extent on American landscape and portrait artists, had no use for the opinion of a black person on works done exclusively by white artists.

JBHE surveyed the art departments at the nation's 27 highest-ranked universi-



*Some of the earliest representations of African Americans in mainstream American art appeared on the currency of the southern states.*

**Total Faculty in Art Departments at the Nation's 27 Highest-Ranked Universities\***

University	Total Art Faculty	Black Faculty	Percent Black
University of Pennsylvania	5	1	20.0 %
Carnegie Mellon University	22	3	13.6
University of Virginia	8	1	12.5
Rice University	9	1	11.1
Univ. of N.C.-Chapel Hill	20	2	10.0
Dartmouth College	11	1	9.1
University of Notre Dame	22	2	9.1
University of Michigan	35	3	8.6
Duke University	13	1	7.7
Wake Forest University	13	1	7.7
Vanderbilt University	15	1	6.7
Washington University	31	2	6.5
Cornell University	18	1	5.6
Harvard University	23	1	4.3
Yale University	94	1	1.1
Brown University	6	0	0.0
Calif. Inst. of Technology	2	0	0.0
Columbia University	39	0	0.0
Emory University	20	0	0.0
Georgetown University	9	0	0.0
Johns Hopkins University	8	0	0.0
Northwestern University	6	0	0.0
Princeton University	19	0	0.0
Stanford University	19	0	0.0
Univ. of California-Berkeley	13	0	0.0
Univ. of Calif.-Los Angeles	13	0	0.0
University of Chicago	21	0	0.0
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>514</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>4.3</b>

\*As rated by U.S. News & World Report.

Source: JBHE RESEARCH DEPARTMENT.

ties to determine the number and percent of black faculty. At these 27 universities, we found 22 black professors of art out of a total combined faculty of 514 scholars. Thus, blacks make up 4.3 percent of all art department faculty at these prestigious universities.

But when we break the figures down by university we find that 22 of the 27 universities had either one or no African Americans on the faculty of their art departments. Twelve had no black faculty members. Columbia University's art department has 39 faculty members. Not one is black. At UCLA, not one of

the 13 art department faculty members is black.

Carnegie Mellon University and the University of Michigan each have three black art professors. Washington University, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and the University of Notre Dame each have two blacks.

When we consider tenured black faculty members, we find only 10 of the 225 tenured art department faculty at these 27 leading universities are black. All three black art professors at the University of Michigan and both black art professors at Washington University are tenured. Together they make up one half of all black tenured art professors at the nation's highest-ranked universities.

Twenty of the 27 highest-ranked universities in the nation have no blacks among their tenured art department faculties.

**Tenured Faculty in Art Departments at the Nation's 27 Highest-Ranked Universities\***

University	Total Art Faculty	Black Faculty	Percent Black
Washington University	2	2	100.0 %
Rice University	6	1	16.7
Yale University	6	1	16.7
University of Michigan	21	3	14.3
Duke University	8	1	12.5
Cornell University	12	1	8.3
University of Notre Dame	14	1	7.1
Brown University	6	0	0.0
Calif. Inst. of Technology	0	0	0.0
Carnegie Mellon University	12	0	0.0
Columbia University	23	0	0.0
Dartmouth College	5	0	0.0
Emory University	0	0	0.0
Georgetown University	5	0	0.0
Johns Hopkins University	7	0	0.0
Harvard University	11	0	0.0
Northwestern University	5	0	0.0
Princeton University	15	0	0.0
Stanford University	14	0	0.0
Univ. of California-Berkeley	13	0	0.0
Univ. of Calif.-Los Angeles	13	0	0.0
University of Chicago	4	0	0.0
Univ. of N.C.-Chapel Hill	1	0	0.0
University of Pennsylvania	2	0	0.0
University of Virginia	6	0	0.0
Vanderbilt University	6	0	0.0
Wake Forest University	8	0	0.0
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>225</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>4.4</b>

\*As rated by U.S. News & World Report.

Source: JBHE RESEARCH DEPARTMENT.

**□ The Persisting Racial Scoring Gap on Graduate and Professional School Admission Tests**

*If the Supreme Court rules that affirmative action in graduate school admissions is unlawful, scores on standardized tests for admission to advanced programs will become even more important than they are today. This has major implications for black students, very few of whom score at high levels on these tests.*

*Under an honest system of race-blind admissions, black enrollments in the nation's leading medical, business, law, and other graduate programs could drop by two thirds or more.*

In the Autumn 2002 issue of JBHE we showed the large and growing gap between black and white students' scores on the standard Scholastic Assessment Test and the American College Testing Program's ACT test for college admission.\*

But, as expected, the very large racial scoring gap on standardized tests is not restricted to undergraduate admissions.

The major graduate testing organizations have now furnished JBHE with data on the racial scoring gaps that prevail on tests for admission to medical, business, law, and other graduate programs. These figures on the racial scoring gap on graduate school admission tests have assumed greater importance in recent years. If the Supreme Court should rule against consideration of race in admissions, the scores on standardized tests for graduate school admissions will become even more important than they are today in limiting the prospects of black students who seek admission to the nation's leading graduate programs.

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*"Nationwide, about 1,450 white students — 58 times as many as black students — score at the very highest levels on the MCAT test."*

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Let's first look at the racial scoring gap on the Medical College Admission Test (MCAT). Students who take the test are graded on a scale of 1 to 15 on three separate sections of the test which include verbal reasoning, the physical sciences, and the biological sciences. In 1999, the latest year for which statistics are available from the Association of American Medical Colleges, blacks made up about 9 percent of the 46,000 students who took the MCAT test. The average score on the three sections for black students

\*See "The Expanding Racial Scoring Gap Between Black and White SAT Test Takers," JBHE, Number 37, Autumn 2002, p. 15.