

The Black Arts Movement

A Visual Arts Perspective

Paul Von Blum

The Black Arts movement is celebrated for its monumental cultural accomplishments as an essential component of the Black Power movement of the late 1960s and early and mid-1970s. That spectacular development sprang from the civil rights ferment of the late 1950s and 1960s and extended into the 1970s, and generated powerful cultural and political resistance to American racism. Poetry, novels, theater, music, oratory, dance, and other creative forms highlighted African Americans' dignity and pride in a nation often determined to deny them fundamental recognition of their legal rights and of their basic humanity. The creative figures of the Black Arts movement (BAM) have made enduring contributions to American culture and have inspired younger generations of artists of all races to continue to use their talents to address the fundamental issues of racial and social justice in their own times.

African American visual artists played a huge and integral part during that exciting era and beyond. Their efforts in murals, painting, prints, posters, sculpture, installations, photography, and other forms highlighted crucial aspects of the Black liberation struggle. Several artists of that era produced politically and socially militant works across different genres and any classification scheme about them is inherently arbitrary. Collectively, their works reminded their own people of their creative powers and capacity for collective resistance and informed the majority population, sometimes bluntly, of the deeply ingrained racism that had dominated its history since its inception.

The visual artists of the BAM were not part of a formal membership organization. Scores of artists were involved, many directly and others more peripherally. Some have been closely identified with the movement, others are legitimate precursors of the movement, and yet others properly deserve acknowledgment for their work even though they have rarely been specifically seen as part of the BAM. These categories too are far from distinct; some "precursors" became participants in the BAM while others were less centrally connected yet produced works that are reflections of the political militancy and energy of the

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era. The thematic range of BAM visual artists was wide. Some of their works involved protest and propaganda, including powerful attacks on American racism and its institutions. Others were expressions of racial pride and celebrations of Black achievement in multiple fields, and still others were expressions of Black outer and inner beauty. Finally, some works reflected acknowledgments of and tributes to African roots, especially as they found expression in musical forms like jazz and other Afrocentric media.

Their cumulative contributions have been belatedly but often inadequately recognized in art history and cultural studies curricula, textbooks and other scholarly accounts, and museum and gallery shows, including mainstream institutions. A major step in that direction occurred in 2014 with the touring exhibition *Witness: Art and Civil Rights in the Sixties*, organized by Teresa Carbonne, Curator of American Art at the Brooklyn Museum, and Kellie Jones, Professor of Art History and Archeology at Columbia University. This exhibition highlighted various powerful works of photography, painting, sculpture, and collage and included representative artists from African American, white, Latinx, Asian American, Native American, and Caribbean communities. It featured many highly recognized artists like Jacob Lawrence, Benny Andrews, Gordon Parks, Ed Kienholz, May Stevens, Andy Warhol, Norman Rockwell, Frank Stella, and others. Some had distinguished careers as socially conscious practitioners. In the case of others, like Stella and Warhol, the exhibition gave the public an opportunity to view their less obviously political works in the broader historical context of the civil rights movement era. The curators, moreover, performed a valuable service by including lesser-known but exemplary artists like African American John Riddle and Chicano Rupert Garcia.

The most crucial restorative step, however, occurred with the *Soul of a Nation* exhibition on the art of the Black Power era that traveled throughout the United States in 2018–2019. This show was a transformative contribution to American art and cultural history and featured many of the artists in this chapter. Among other things, the exhibition encouraged audiences to reflect about what actually constitutes a Black aesthetic and how artists can effectively reflect and support civil rights and Black Power political movements and activities. The exhibition highlighted some of the disagreements that Black artists had about the values and virtues of figurative versus abstract art and about political art in general. But its presence alone went a long way in finally recognizing that visual artists played a crucial role in the Black Arts movement.

It is vital to reveal and acknowledge the deeper sources of the *Soul of a Nation* exhibition. It originated at Tate Modern in London in 2017, curated by Mark Godfrey and Zoe Whitley. That it began at a major modern and contemporary museum in the United Kingdom suggests the global influence

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of the BAM. Likewise, it encourages a deeper understanding of British and Caribbean influences on the arts and politics of the American Black Power movement generally. In particular, artists from the BLK ART Group including Keith Piper, Marlene Smith, Eddie Chambers, Donald Rodney, and others revealed a strong British/Caribbean element in the 1980s and beyond with a highly political focus. This cross-fertilization reveals why the American art of the Black Power movement should not be viewed in an exclusive context of U.S. exceptionalism.

Soul of a Nation revived the work of scores of Black artists from that era. It profoundly influenced contemporary cultural discourse with BAM visions and voices. The creative women and men represented in this exhibition have now assumed their legitimate place in contemporary dialogues about African American culture and art. As Thelma Golden, Director and Chief Curator of the Studio Museum of Harlem, said of the exhibition in its catalogue, "It is sure to be a profoundly valuable resource ... for decades to come."

It is impossible to document fully the myriad accomplishments of these remarkably creative women and men; literally hundreds of visual artists from that dynamic era could legitimately be regarded as part of the BAM. The quest for critical acknowledgment of African American artists (and other artists of color and women) will continue as long as the chief academic, museum, gallery, and media gatekeepers remain privileged white men. That struggle continues even as artists of color and their supporters have established alternative institutions including museums, galleries, and print and digital publishing outlets that cater to African American visual artists. One point is abundantly clear: the visual artists of the BAM changed modern American art history as well as American history in general.

Jeff Donaldson, the *Wall of Respect*, and Community Murals

Jeff Donaldson (1932–2004) is often viewed as the visual artist most specifically associated with the Black Arts movement. His work on the iconic *Wall of Respect* mural in Chicago (Figure 10.1) helped catalyze the American mural renaissance that led to the creation of hundreds of vibrant, often politically charged works of public art throughout the country. This mural helped transform the aesthetics of Black neighborhoods by infusing themes of protest, dignity, and pride on exterior and interior walls on a scale not seen since the Works Progress Administration during the New Deal. Donaldson began painting murals in 1960 and in 1967 helped organize the Organization of Black American Cultures (OBAC), a group of Black Chicago artists in different creative fields who were sympathetic to the vision of Black Power.

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Figure 10.1 *Wall of Respect* mural, Chicago
(photo: Robert A. Sengstacke)

Donaldson also helped found AfriCOBRA (African Commune of Bad Relevant Artists), which was an African American artists' collective formed in Chicago that produced work on culturally specific Black themes, an aesthetic that directly contradicted the mainstream art of the era. The members sought an art that would be accessible to members of the Black community and that would address issues of vital social, political, and economic conditions that they encountered.

Along with work by William Walker, Wadsworth Jarrell, Barbara Jones-Hogu, and numerous other artists, the Wall of Respect was, as Donaldson noted, a guerrilla mural, which proclaimed the view that Black people must define their identity and their history for themselves. They could express their own heroes on the walls, including Malcolm X, W. E. B. Du Bois, Charlie Parker, Ray Charles, Muhammad Ali, Dick Gregory, and many others in numerous creative, athletic, religious, and political fields. The mural became a landmark of Black pride; it was never intended to be permanent but its legacy has lived on to the present in many forms through numerous reproductions and works of scholarship.

Jeff Donaldson also produced hundreds of highly colorful paintings during his career, most of which reflected his long and deep commitment to the political vision of the Black Power ideology and to human rights generally. His works were widely exhibited nationally and internationally. He also had a long and successful career as an academic and administrator at Howard University.

Other BAM Muralists

Many other visual artists associated with the Black Arts movement were deeply involved in the mural renaissance of the 1960s and 1970s. Many of them, of course, also reflected the spirit of that movement in individual

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works they produced throughout their careers. William Walker (1927–2011) is often considered the founder of the modern mural movement because of his consummate commitment to public art, especially with Black thematic content. Like Donaldson, he was one of the founders of OBAC and later co-founded the Chicago Mural Group, later known as the Chicago Public Art Group, with John Pitman Weber and Eugene Eda.

Walker painted powerful murals throughout Chicago and Detroit, mostly addressing racial issues reflecting the spirit of those times. Some of his most notable contributions, beyond his work on the *Wall of Respect*, include the *Wall of Truth* (1969, Chicago), *Wall of Dignity* (1968, Detroit), the *Harriet Tubman Memorial Wall* (1968, Detroit), *Peace and Salvation* (1970, Chicago), *All of Mankind* (1971–1973, Chicago), and *Childhood Is Without Prejudice* (1977, Chicago). Although several of these works have been destroyed, many others have been restored and are available to audiences interested in this vibrant era of public community art.

Dana Chandler, aka Akin Duro (1941–), brought the mural tradition eastward to Boston. Throughout his long career, Chandler has produced visual work with strong Black content. His murals in Boston reflected the tone of the Chicago efforts. He, Gary Rickson, and Sharon Dunn painted Black Power murals that challenged the absence of African American visual art in Boston's tradition elitist art institutions. He saw Black murals—and Black art in general—as a revolutionary force, not as decoration. Chandler made a mural of Malcolm X, *Knowledge is Power/Stay in School, Freedom and Self Defense*, and several others.

His other artworks also reflected this militant spirit. His easel paintings are provocative and deliberately unsubtle attacks on white racism. His most iconic work reflecting the spirit of the BAM is *Fred Hampton's Door 2*, a powerful and unnerving work that memorializes the young Black Panther Party leader who was murdered by the Chicago police in December 1969. This piece is an entire green and red door with bullet holes to commemorate that horrific racist tragedy. It was a key work in the *Soul of the Nation* exhibition on the art of the Black Power era.

In the spirit of the *Wall of Respect*, Black muralists contributed works throughout the Northeast. New York, Philadelphia, Washington, D.C., and elsewhere were major sites for these visual expressions. The Black community arts movement also spread to the West Coast, a development less often recognized in the popular and scholarly literature. In San Francisco, Dewey Crumpler (1949–) emerged as the leading African American muralist expressing themes that advanced the vision of the BAM. He specifically acknowledged the influence of Jeff Donaldson and William Walker for his own mural creations. His large-scale murals, although sometimes executed

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after the peak BAM mural explosion of the late 1960s and 1970s, became a beacon of Bay Area public visual art excellence.

Los Angeles too produced scores of powerful Black-themed murals throughout the city, making it one of the nation's largest centers of public art. African American artists Elliot Pinkney, Alice Patrick, Richard Wyatt, Ulysses Jenkins, Noni Olabisi, Roderick Sykes, Michael Massenburg, and several others created murals both during and after the peak of the BAM era that critiqued American racism and highlighted Black accomplishments in multiple fields. Their cumulative efforts constitute an indelible contribution to that broader tradition of visual expression.

Precursors

All of the visual artists involved with the Black Arts movement would joyfully acknowledge that their work was not produced in a historical vacuum. Many African American artistic giants preceded their efforts. A major source of influence in the twentieth century was the Harlem Renaissance, when Black artists played a substantial role in Harlem's cultural and political excitement during the 1910s, 1920s, and early 1930s. These creative women and men produced multitudes of paintings, prints, drawings, book illustrations, sculptures, and photographs that helped introduce Black life to the nation and made African American themes the primary focus of Black art for the next century.

Visual artists including Aaron Douglas, Meta Fuller, Augusta Savage, Palmer Hayden, William H. Johnson, Archibald Motley, and James Van Der Zee made African American art a major component of American art and history in general. Their cumulative contributions have been comprehensively (but sometimes belatedly, even grudgingly) recognized in art history and cultural studies curricula, textbooks and other scholarly accounts, and museum and gallery shows nationally and internationally. Above all, their works revealed that people of African ancestry were fully entitled to equality under the law and deserved the same dignity and respect as any other ethnic and racial group in America. A few of their works, perhaps most notably Motley's magnificent painting *The First One Hundred Years: He Amongst You Who Is Without Sin Shall Cast The First Stone; Forgive Them Father For They Know Not What They Do* (1963–1972), are considered part of the BAM visual arts body of work.

Specific Black Artistic Precursors

Hale Woodruff (1900–1980) was a gifted painter, muralist, printmaker, and teacher whose socially conscious and historical works highlighted the Black experience. Also a major abstractionist, he contributed significantly to that tradition of American art, along with many African American luminaries, including Norman Lewis, Alma Thomas, Al Loving, Sam Gilliam, and Mel Edwards. Paintings such as *Cathedral Door* and *Sentinel Gate* show his remarkable depth and vision. Throughout his career, Woodruff also focused on issues of racism and the capacity of people of African origin to overcome barriers and resist the oppression they encountered in the New World. The artists of the BAM reflected Woodruff's vision in their own works, updating that perspective and making it relevant to the political and social turbulence and the increasing racial awareness of the African American population of the mid-twentieth century.

Woodruff's early prints attacked lynching and other white racist injustices perpetrated on African Americans. These efforts presaged the strong political consciousness of many BAM visual artists. His murals, however, are the clearest and most direct link. His *Amistad* murals at Taladega College (1938) relate dramatically to the historic revolt on the slave ship *Amistad*. His mural at the Golden State Mutual Life Insurance Company in Los Angeles (1949) is a detailed and positive view of Black contributions to California history. His Atlanta University mural series on the *Art of the Negro* (1951) celebrates African and African American visual creativity. The *Wall of Respect* and all its progeny owe their existence and their power, in substantial ways, to Hale Woodruff's pioneering efforts.

Romare Bearden (1911–1988) is generally considered the finest American collage artist. His technical innovations inspired countless visual artists over the decades and added a unique dimension to the tradition of African American art. Growing up in the South, he focused his early work on his personal life, documenting the Black rural experience in particular. This served as the foundation for his later Black-themed work that influenced BAM visual artists, and some of his creations were viewed as part of that movement.

At the height of the modern civil rights movement, during his early experimentations with the collage form, Bearden became a founding member of the art group known as Spiral, composed of many outstanding African American artists. The group ranged in style from abstractionists to social protest painters, but all were profoundly concerned about the role of Black artists in American society. Bearden's artworks portrayed Blacks in several settings, focusing on memory, migration, ritual, music (especially jazz), family, and related topics that spoke to Black audiences (and others). Works like *Pittsburgh Memory*, *Conjur Woman*, *Prevalence of Ritual*, and scores of others profoundly influenced his Black

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contemporaries and successors. Moreover, he mentored younger Black artists and was regularly involved in helping to establish Black cultural institutions. The BAM is forever indebted to his life and work.

Jacob Lawrence (1917–2000) is probably the best-known and most recognized African American artist of the twentieth century. Long before most of his predecessors and contemporaries, he was regularly included in textbooks and exhibitions on American art (a reality that troubled him throughout his life). During his distinguished career, he sought to express Black history through his paintings and prints. His vivid colors and imaginative designs allowed him to highlight the struggles and accomplishments of his people.

Lawrence is best known for his narrative series, which told stories of Black heroes and their supporters. Among the best known of his series is the *Migration of the Negro*, which documents in sixty panels the story of more than a million African Americans who fled the South and its economic oppression and violence, including lynchings, unjust jailings, and attacks by the Ku Klux Klan. These iconic paintings chronicle their journey to New York, Chicago, St. Louis, and elsewhere. Jacob Lawrence also produced powerful series about the lives of Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman, and John Brown. All of these efforts preceded the provocative and incisive historical works that BAM artists produced; all of these latter visual artists were doubtless aware of Lawrence's pioneering works and many specifically acknowledged their professional debt to their celebrated master.

Few artists in American history can rival the lifetime artistic accomplishments of Elizabeth Catlett (1915–2012). She was a leading Black, feminist, and political artist in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. This truly remarkable woman devoted her life to expressing critical ideas in powerful visual form both in the United States and in her adopted country of Mexico. Her majestic career as printmaker, sculptor, educator, and activist inspired virtually everyone in *all* domains of the BAM. Dignified portrayals of African Americans, especially of women, were a major feature of her sculpture and prints. Her compelling portraits of anonymous Black working women complemented her portraits of historical luminaries like Sojourner Truth, Phyllis Wheatley, Harriet Tubman, and Angela Davis. Her public sculptures, like her majestic depictions of Louis Armstrong and Mahalia Jackson in New Orleans, also contributed to her stellar international reputation.

Specific political commentary also pervaded her artwork over the years. Above all, she provided striking visual support for the historic African American struggles for freedom and dignity. Her prints like *Civil Rights Congress* (1949), *Malcolm Speaks for Us* (1969), and several others join sculptures including *Homage to My Young Black Sisters* (1968) and *Black Unity* (1968) to reveal her enduring commitment to the tradition of militant Black protest, one of the major themes

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of African American visual art generally for more than a hundred years. *Black Unity*, carved from mahogany, features the raised fist of the Black Power salute and was featured in *Soul of a Nation*. Before her death, Elizabeth Catlett created prints that revealed the continuing plight of Black children in a racist environment in America that persisted despite the advances of the modern civil rights movement. That also reveals why she is regularly perceived as one of the elders of the BAM.

Charles White (1918–1979), like his first wife Catlett, is also widely viewed as both a precursor and participant in the BAM. In 2018–2019, a major exhibition that traveled throughout the United States entitled *Charles White: A Retrospective* honored his life and work and reinforced his strong national and international reputation. White combined outstanding technical skill as a painter and printmaker with a lifelong commitment to chronicling the hopes and struggles of the African American population. His artworks celebrated African American heroes as well as ordinary women and men struggling to maintain dignity in a racist society. He achieved major national and international acclaim even in an era when abstract expressionism dominated the mainstream art world.

As a young artist, he broke art historical ground by portraying Black history grandly and positively. At Hampton Institute, he painted his famous 1943 mural entitled *Contributions of the Negro to American Democracy*, highlighting many key figures of African American history, including Crispus Attucks, Nat Turner, Denmark Vesey, Sojourner Truth, Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman, Booker T. Washington, Paul Robeson, and Marian Anderson. His various series including *J'Accuse* and *Wanted Posters* presented audiences with a new dimension of socially conscious Black visual art. His magisterial portrait of Harriet Tubman, *General Moses*, is one of the most magnificent drawings in twentieth-century art history. Finally, White had a huge influence on his students, both technically and intellectually. He provided younger Black artists with guidance and encouragement in an art world that was indifferent, even hostile, to artists of African descent. His personal mentorship to many artists helped propel them to the artistic stature they have all earned and enjoyed. Many continued on as prominent contributors to the BAM.

Artist and activist Cliff Joseph (1927–2020) is, like several others, both precursor and participant in the BAM. Not as widely known as many of his contemporaries, he has nevertheless created a remarkable body of socially critical artworks during his lifetime. His entire artistic career has focused on attacking racism, sexism, and war; this perspective places him both within the broad tradition of mainstream American political artists as well as the African American artists for whom critical antiracist and triumphant pro-Black commentary is a paramount priority.

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Joseph's paintings against lynching, his posters advancing the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), his visual treatments of topical issues like the revolt at Attica Prison and the struggle against South African apartheid, and many related themes all reflect his deepest personal values and his artistic vision. But arguably his most iconic painting is his 1972 *Blackboard*, which provides an alternative Black Power education for young people. Ranging from A to Z, the blackboard highlights such names and concepts as Community Control, Du Bois, Evers, Power to the People, Sojourner Truth, Quality Education, Toussaint L'Ouverture, and many others. This dramatic work is also included in the 2018–2019 *Soul of a Nation* exhibition.

John Biggers (1924–2001) produced a prolific body of art that was inspired by his Southern African American roots and later by his African travels. Biggers's artistic talent was encouraged when he was trained at the Hampton Institute in the early 1940s. His teacher and mentor, art educator Viktor Lowenfeld, especially nurtured him. At Hampton, he developed a strong political consciousness that infused his work throughout his career. Both Elizabeth Catlett and Charles White were also present at Hampton, along with Samella Lewis, making that institution an unusually vibrant locale for African American art with a social and political bent. After watching Charles White paint *Contributions of the Negro to American Democracy*, Biggers made murals a key element of his own efforts, completing more than twenty during his life. And like White, he was a master draftsman whose figurative drawings and paintings likewise influenced his contemporaries and younger artists throughout the twentieth century.

Biggers's imagery often highlighted the daily lives, the rituals, and above all the dignity of ordinary Black people in America, including Black women. Many of his works were strong commentaries on poverty and the deprivations that his people faced and overcame. His "shotgun" series about the houses of the rural Black South reflected a view of the strength and resilience of that population. His paintings incorporating African symbols and themes broke new ground in African American art. All of these themes resonated throughout the BAM, among many of the women and men in the visual arts and in all the other creative expressions during those exhilarating times.

Assemblage Artists

Assemblage artists played a huge role in the visual arts component of the Black Arts movement. The word assemblage means art that combines materials and components, generally insignificant by themselves, to form engaging constructions, often with socially provocative meaning. Since the mid-1960s,

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African American artists in Los Angeles especially have been unusually imaginative in developing artistic products enabling them to achieve widespread critical recognition and respect while advancing visions of Black Power and pride.

Many of these artists have used nontraditional materials and forms, often found on the streets, to create a growing legacy of visual art that has brought them national and international visibility. Several prominent African American artists used the Watts Rebellion in Los Angeles of 1965 as a key catalyst for their collective artistic vision. Even before the smoldering remains of Watts and surrounding black neighborhoods disappeared from national consciousness, artists Noah Purifoy, Betye Saar, John Outterbridge, David Hammons, John Riddle, and others collected and transformed objects and materials into powerful artworks that often expressed trenchant antiracist social and historical commentary. These artistic luminaries are profiled below (Hammons's work is multifaceted and appears later in this chapter). It is crucial to recognize that the collective influence of these masters extended to many prominent contemporary African American assemblage artists including Charles Dickson, La Monte Westmoreland, Dale Davis, Timothy Washington, Dominique Moody, Yrneh Brown, and others.

“Debris” and “garbage” from the remains of burnt and destroyed buildings and streets became the raw material for an emerging tradition of African American art in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Long before the national recycling movement began, Black Los Angeles area artists initiated their own program of creative visual production from the rubble of their own communities. In short, they “recovered the rubble” and in the process brought African American visual art to new heights of visual distinction.

Specific Assemblage Artists and the BAM

Noah Purifoy (1917–2004) is often regarded as the key visual artist who initiated the African American focus on recovering trash to make art—the father of the African American assemblage art movement in the Los Angeles area. Throughout his career, Purifoy encouraged the use of art as a tool for social change—a premise that has long pervaded African American art history generally. His distinctive personal style involved the collection of discarded materials that he fashioned together into a creative whole. He used common objects to tell the stories of his people, emphasizing that these objects could actually be more effective than traditional artistic materials in communicating the struggles of people who came to America in bondage and who suffered centuries of brutal oppression.

He became a major participant in the historic *66 Signs of Neon* exhibition, based on artworks assembled from the debris of the Watts Rebellion. The

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exhibition created 66 separate artworks. Most found no permanent home and the materials returned to the junk heaps from which they originally came. That rebellion, one of many during those turbulent times, revealed the huge pent-up rage among African Americans, frustrated after generations of second-class citizenship, poverty, unemployment, police brutality, and other egregious and more subtle manifestations of American racism. Purifoy's most famous work, *Sir Watts* (1966), typified this new approach. In creating his "knight," a symbolic Black warrior, he used wood, metal, glass, safety pins, and other found objects and materials to offer a visual homage to the historic battles of his people. His *Watts Riot* and *Totem* from the same time period also brought Black art (and Black Power) to the national consciousness.

Betye Saar (1926–), an internationally acclaimed artist in the early twenty-first century, grew up in Watts near the famous Towers that Italian immigrant Simon Rodia created. The influence of that magnificent "folk art" construction can be seen throughout her decades of brilliant artistic productions. Her longtime interest in spiritual concerns, in social and political criticism, and in African ancestry have all combined to make her a unique representative of the BAM and of course far beyond, because of the many imaginative phases of her career. Like Purifoy, she used castoff materials like broken glass, bottle tops, steel, cement, and other objects in constructing her dramatic artworks. Many of her efforts have addressed issues of gender, race, ethnicity, ageism, body politics, and African sources of Black life, spirituality, and culture. All these concerns were central to the Black Power era and its myriad cultural expressions.

Several of Betye Saar's works played a huge role during that period. In 1972, for example, she produced one of the most striking and iconic pieces from those times. *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima* (Figure 10.2) is a mixed media work that reflected her commitment to the Black liberation movement. She transformed the stereotypical image of the fat, servile mammy selling food products for capitalist America into a gun-toting revolutionary—the essence of Black Power. Like the old Jemima, the masses of African Americans would also soon be free. Saar also collected other derogatory images and symbols of Black people and transformed them artistically to make them expressions of liberation. Her *Sambo's Banjo* from 1972 incorporated a watermelon slice and caricatured images of Black men. Likewise, in her 1977 *Spirit Catcher* assemblage and similar works, she offered her audiences opportunities for deeper reflections about Africa as an additional opportunity for racial uplift and transformation.

John Outterbridge (1933–2020), like Betye Saar, has also achieved major international recognition for his prolific body of assemblage works. He regularly prowled the streets and junkyards to find materials that related to the human condition, especially to his own experiences as an African American in a white racist society. His method is to recycle and refabricate these castaway objects into



Figure 10.2 Betye Saar, *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima*, 1972
(photo: courtesy Roberts Projects, Culver City, California)

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artworks that express his views about political, historical, and deeply personal issues. His overall focus, like that of his Los Angeles assemblage contemporaries, is compellingly Afrocentric, making it a vital contribution to the broader vision of BAM expressive culture.

Many of Outterbridge's works addressed specific concerns that were ubiquitous during the civil rights/Black Power era. In his *Traditional Hang-Up* from 1969, for example, he used a mixed media construction to place severed wooden heads under a painted and deliberately scratched American flag. The message was clear: America's Black population never enjoyed the legal equality and political justice supposedly represented by the nation's flag. His *Containment* and *Rag Man* series from the same time period dealt with issues of racial entrapment and methods of survival by collecting other people's trash and discards. His later works continued those general concerns, making Outterbridge a hugely respected contemporary figure of African American art.

Throughout his artistic career, John Riddle (1933–2002) was highly political, focusing on the problems that Black people faced. Like his colleagues in the Los Angeles assemblage artistic community, he collected discarded objects to serve as his basic artistic source material. He regularly accompanied his friend John Outterbridge on early morning "field trips" around Los Angeles to salvage materials. Above all, Riddle was a sculptor and printmaker of extraordinary talent. His work in Los Angeles and later in his adopted residence of Atlanta propelled him to the forefront of excellence of visual art that chronicled the Black experience. His works also addressed broader issues including the Vietnam War and the egregious errors of U.S. foreign policy.

Some of Riddle's specific efforts locate him centrally within the meaning and spirit of the BAM. In his 1966 *Ghetto Merchant*, he used a destroyed cash register from a burnt storefront that he found in the wreckage of the Watts Riots. He placed the skeletal remains of that machine on metal legs he found in a junkyard; the whole assemblage signified the utter fragility and marginality of ghetto merchants in a racist environment. Other of his works called attention to the criminal "justice" system, the harsh conditions of Black daily life, the government attacks on the Black Panthers, and related issues relevant to the Black population (and to their supporters in other communities). In 1999 he returned to Los Angeles to head the Visual Arts Division of the California African American Museum. His untimely death in 2002 ended his brilliant career as an artist and educator.

Photographers

Photography has been a major feature of African American visual art since the mid-nineteenth century. Black photographers have documented the entire panorama of Black life, from the hardships of slavery and racism to Black successes and accomplishments. They have chronicled Black family and daily life and have revealed the pain and sorrows of poverty and incarceration. They have played an indispensable role in recording and contributing to African art history as well as to photojournalism. Acclaimed photographic historian Deborah Willis has written numerous books and articles about this visual tradition and has made pioneering contributions to the scholarly record. Her work has enabled scholars and laypersons alike to understand and appreciate the multifaceted contributions of Black photographers; she has brought them into the mainstream of critical discourse and made this aspect of Black expressive culture a powerful feature of contemporary visual dialogue and debate.

Scores or more of Black photographers documented the civil rights/Black Power era. This record has allowed U.S. and international audiences to see how that agitational period changed the landscape of race relations and how African Americans continued their slow and continuing march to full dignity and liberation. Some of these photographers have achieved high levels of recognition and are widely acknowledged as major figures in the Black Arts community of visual artists.

Specific Photographers and the BAM

Gordon Parks (1912–2006) was one of America's great Renaissance persons. An accomplished composer, author, and filmmaker, he was the closest rival to Paul Robeson in being so excellent in so many different fields. His central field of accomplishment was his decades of distinction as a photographer. He used his camera as a weapon against poverty and racism from the 1930s until his death. The first African American photographer for *Life* magazine, he could well have been included in the "Precursors" section of this chapter. His portraits of such Black activist luminaries as Muhammad Ali, Malcolm X, Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., and Stokely Carmichael, and his relentless documentation and advocacy of the civil rights movement mandate his inclusion in this section.

It is impossible to summarize the prolific work of Parks. His civil rights photography from 1963 to 1970, presaging the start of the Black Power era, reveals the turbulence and the heroic resistance of Black Americans and their supporters in fighting the degrading institutions of Jim Crow. His images show determination and resilience, hallmarks of the Black struggle. Parks's individual

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portraits of such leaders as Muhammad Ali and Malcolm X, especially in light of their unpopularity with the majority white population at the time, reveals his personal sympathy with their radical liberation ideologies. In 1967 he photographed Stokely Carmichael (later Kwame Ture) giving a charismatic speech in Watts. Carmichael, who originated the “Black Power” slogan, earned enormous respect with Parks, truly one of the monumental figures of the BAM.

Roy DeCarava (1919–2009) is another iconic photographer in African American and American art history. His photographic range was enormous, and perhaps more than any of his contemporaries, he produced work that placed him in the front rank of photographers who made aesthetic as well as documentary contributions. Many of his images were “creative expressions” rather than political or social statements. Still, he remains a huge presence in the BAM visual panoply. An award-winning photographer, he and writer Langston Hughes collaborated in 1955 on a compelling document on Harlem family life, entitled *The Sweet Flypaper of Life*. His deep involvement with his community led him in 1963 to co-found and lead the Kamoinge Workshop, a Harlem-based collective that supported the work of Black mutual development and collective nurturing.

Many of his specific photographs have become landmarks of the Black freedom struggle. His photograph known as *Mississippi Freedom Marcher, Washington, D. C.* from 1963 is one of the most famous images from that time. It shows a determined, beautiful young woman who will let *nothing* stand in her way in her quest for freedom, justice, and dignity. Her expression powerfully captures the attitudes and mood of all 250,000 people who attended the historic march on Washington on August 28, 1963. DeCarava’s portrait of *Five Men* leaving a Harlem memorial for the four girls murdered in the 16th Street Baptist church in Birmingham evokes the sorrow and anger of the Black population of the era. His portraits of Malcolm X and other liberation participants also reveal his commitments to his people. His depictions of Harlem and jazz in those times likewise show why he is a central figure of the BAM.

Robert (Bobby) Sengstacke (1943–2017) never achieved the level of national and international visibility of Gordon Parks and Roy DeCarava, but he made significant photographic contributions to the civil rights and Black Power movements throughout his life. His works have been on display throughout the nation, including at such major institutions as the Smithsonian Museum of African American History and Culture, the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, the DuSable Museum of African American history and elsewhere. Throughout his career, Sengstacke photographed major political leaders of the Black liberation struggle as well as ordinary African Americans.

Sengstacke’s premier contribution to the BAM is his documentation of the *Wall of Respect*. In 1971 that iconic symbol of the BAM was harmed when fire

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damaged the building on which it was painted and then the entire building was torn down. Although the mural was destroyed, it has lived on in photographs by OBAC photographers, most especially Sengstacke. His images of the various sections of the mural and of the various artists at work are magnificent. His work has constituted a valuable cultural reference point for *the* key artwork that launched the visual arts component of the BAM. Sengstacke's photographs of the wall have made a powerful contribution to scholars and others who explore the dynamism of that time. His other portraits, moreover, provide a human glimpse into the daily activities of Black people in meetings, playing music, and organizing events and protests—in short, the spirit of the times.

Posters

Political posters have been an indispensable feature of visual social commentary for centuries. Posters are both works of art and notices to the public. Intended for mass reproduction, they combine verbal messages with visual elements designed to attract viewers and solidify their commitment to the cause. Their effectiveness depends on efficient, inexpensive reproduction that will swiftly disseminate the work's major theme or message. During the civil rights/Black Power era, they helped mobilize people for both consciousness and action. Many posters were produced by anonymous artists and disappeared quickly after their creation, following the events or demonstrations they promoted. Some have been collected and are in archives and private collections commemorating the art and politics of those times.

The most notable posters emerged from the Black Panther Party. The key organ for the dissemination of these vibrant posters was the *The Black Panther*, the official newspaper of the organization. The paper was widely read and disseminated throughout the country and the world. Founded by Panther Party leaders Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale, it began as a four-page newsletter and soon transitioned into a full newspaper. It chronicled the Party's activities and proclaimed its revolutionary ideals. The chief artist was the Minister of Culture of the Party, Emory Douglas, the most significant representative of poster art of the entire Black Arts movement.

Emory Douglas (1943–) trained as a graphic artist before he joined the Black Panther Party in 1967. The newspaper wanted a strong visual component and Douglas fit the bill perfectly. Throughout his tenure as Minister of Culture, he presented the Party's ideology in visual form. Brutally direct and politically unobscure, his posters and prints graced the front and back pages of the paper. His works educated and inspired his audiences to action, a major tenet of the Black Power movement. His posters were biting critiques of racism, police brutality,

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Figure 10.3 Emory Douglas, *All Power to the People*, 1970

(photo: © 2019 Emory Douglas / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York)

capitalism, imperialism, poverty, substandard housing, the war in Vietnam, and related issues. He portrayed Black women and children heroically and made poster portraits of Black Panther leaders and other revolutionary figures. His biting caricatures of police and politicians stand out as among the finest examples of visual satire in the twentieth century. Douglas also designed book covers for poet Sonia Sanchez and a sleeve for Panther leader Elaine Brown's LP. Mostly, however, Douglas's posters were plastered on walls, alleys, barbershops, liquor stores, gas stations, and everywhere that people could see them. They were the antithesis to elite museum and gallery art.

Of the hundreds of works that Emory Douglas produced, some have emerged as emblematic of the Black Power/Black Arts movement period. Millions of viewers over the years have seen his iconic poster of Panther leader Huey Newton wearing his beret and black leather jacket. He holds a rifle and a spear while seated in a large rattan throne on a zebra print rug and next to African shields. Almost equally well known is his *All Power to the People* (Figure 10.3), a 1970 effort showing an armed youngster holding a copy of the Panther newspaper with this as the headline. Douglas managed to express both the rage and the hope of his people during the Black liberation struggles of the 1960s and 1970s. He remains a forceful artistic presence in the early twenty-first century.

Independent Artists of the BAM

This section gathers several visual artists who have been widely acknowledged as participants in the Black Arts movement but who are not generally regarded as falling into one of the earlier categories in this chapter, or whose wide scope of creative production transcends such categories. These talented women and men made enormous contributions to the cultural landscape of the times; some have passed on while others continue the spirit of their work even in their senior years.

Reginald Gammon (1921–2005) spent a lifetime using his artistic talent to chronicle African American history. He produced hundreds of paintings,

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drawings, and prints and focused almost entirely on the human figure—a major perspective of African American art since the nineteenth century. His most notable works were inspired by the conflicts and controversies of the Black struggles against injustice and for freedom. In 1969 he and fellow artist Benny Andrews formed the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition, which took to the streets to protest the exclusion of Black artists from major New York museums. This activism also reflected the spirit of the BAM.

Gammon is best known for his 1963 painting *Freedom Now*, a work that powerfully reflects the Black activist spirit of the times. That work alone links him to the broader panoply of BAM artists. Its aggressive form matches the aggressive mood of the people who emerged to struggle for their constitutional and human rights. Gammon also painted works about the Scottsboro case and portraits of iconic Black figures like Jack Johnson and Marian Anderson.

Benny Andrews (1930–2006) was a socially conscious artist with a unique artistic style. Like Gammon, he was committed to political activism in his community, especially with the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition, in achieving greater recognition and opportunities for African American artists. His art always reflected this activist spirit. His paintings, collages, and drawings addressed civil rights activities, protests against unjust U.S. wars, struggles by other oppressed ethnic groups, as well as critical and sympathetic visual commentaries on the human condition. His work joins the longer tradition of humanist art that goes back to such giant figures as Hogarth, Daumier, Kollwitz, and many others, including many in African American art history.

His 1969 painting *Did the Bear Sit Under a Tree?* was included in the massive *Soul of a Nation* exhibition. *No More Games* from 1971 specifically addresses the plight of Black artists, reflecting both Andrews's personal activism and a persistent issue in the minds of virtually all BAM artists at the time. Many of his other works likewise expressed the attitudes and feelings of his fellow artist/activists of those times. Near the end of his life, Andrews continued his socially conscious works, and setting an example for younger Black artists who have continued in his path in the early decades of the new century.

One of America's most renowned painters, sculptors, quiltmakers, and performance artists, Faith Ringgold (1930–) is also celebrated as one of the key feminist and African American visual artists of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Her work is central to an understanding and appreciation of the BAM as well as every other current of visual social commentary for more than half a century. Her unique style in every medium has highlighted Black culture and elevated women. She has used quilts and craft materials to make a dramatic feminist statement. Her art regularly expresses anger at the treatment of her fellow African Americans, and she has also published and illustrated numerous children's books about important African American historical figures. Through

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openly creating “illustration” as opposed to “fine art,” she further chipped away at elite notions of what art should be. She used her talents for children and the public good—not for the dominant white critics in the media and academia. Throughout her long creative life, Ringgold has been an artistic and activist pioneer for marginalized communities.

Not surprising, some of her artworks were represented in the *Soul of a Nation* exhibition, including *Free All Political Prisoners* (1970), *United States of Attica* (1971–1972), and *American People Series: Die* (1967). During the Black Power era, she also produced such provocative works as *Die, U.S. Stamp Commemorating the Advent of Black Power*, and *Flag for the Moon: Die Nigger*. She also used her art to celebrate Black figures like Adam Clayton Powell and Dr. Martin Luther King. Well into her ninth decade, Faith Ringgold has continued her excellence as an artist of conscience, inspiring her younger colleagues to emulate and implement her vision of a liberated Black and feminist culture.

Wadsworth Jarrell (1929–) is a dynamic painter and sculptor and the co-founder of AfriCOBRA in 1967. He was a major participant in the *Wall of Respect* mural in Chicago, working closely with Jeff Donaldson and OBAC. He is widely regarded as a key participant in the BAM. Stylistically, Jarrell paints with extremely vibrant colors and his compositions often include words and messages reflecting his strong commitment to Black social and political causes. His works often include images of major Black figures of the era, including Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Angela Davis, Huey Newton, Bobby Seale, and others. His jazz-themed artworks pay tribute to the long musical tradition of African American culture. This feature of his art acknowledges and honors a related aspect of Black expressive culture, an integral dimension of the BAM.

Several of his works, like those of many of the other artists discussed in this chapter, were represented in the historic *Soul of a Nation* exhibition. *Black Prince* (1971) is a highly detailed portrait of Malcolm X, whose finger and wrist highlight the letter “B,” representing the theme of “Black is Beautiful,” a prevalent slogan of those times. *Liberation Soldiers* from 1972 is equally complex and colorful. It depicts Black Panther Party leaders Huey Newton and several of his colleagues, key resistance and agitational figures of the Black Power era. *Revolutionary* from 1972, containing substantial textual elements, is a colorful portrait homage to Angela Davis, another iconic Black figure then and now. Jarrell’s works continue to be exhibited, collected, and reviewed. He remains a major figure in contemporary African American art history.

Like her spouse Wadsworth Jarrell, Jae Jarrell (1935–) is intimately linked to the BAM. She was also a co-founder of AfriCOBRA and used her talents as a fashion designer to create garments that inspired African Americans to develop and increase pride and resistance throughout the United States. As a youth, she was exposed to tailoring, clothing, and fabrics and understood the

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craftsmanship required to produce high-quality wearable products. During the Black Power era, Jarrell created a revolutionary aesthetic in her clothing line. She has added a strong and durable dimension to African American art history. Her work transcends and even confronts conventional art history by adding nontraditional features; clothing, like tattoos, prison art, hairstyles, street art, graffiti, and other “marginal” visual forms, is typically ignored and shunned in the elite academy.

Some of Jae Jarrell’s revolutionary garments were included in the *Soul of a Nation* exhibition. *Revolutionary Suit* from 1969 is a woman’s suit that combines wool, suede, wood, and pigment, empowering a woman with its bandolier with multicolored dowels across her chest. This symbol of armed resistance reveals a Black militancy that frightened many sectors of white America, but also compelled the majority population to realize that African Americans would no longer accept a second-class and servile status. Another of Jarrell’s clothing creations, *Brothers Surrounding Sis* from 1970, is a colorful woman’s outfit that has portraits of young men aggressively linking arms. This show of solidarity between Black women and men is another guiding principle of the BAM. Still active, Jae Jarrell has added sculpture to her artistic output by constructing furniture with an Afrocentric focus. This later work reflects her original AfriCOBRA perspective.

Barbara Jones-Hogu (1938–2017) was also a founding member of AfriCOBRA and participated in the groundbreaking *Wall of Respect* mural in Chicago as a member of OBAC. These accomplishments alone merit her inclusion in any narrative of the visual artists of the BAM. Throughout her creative life, she was a painter, printmaker, and filmmaker. She was not as widely recognized in the scholarly and popular literature as many of her BAM contemporaries, but her work was consistently first-rate and contributed strongly to the visual currents of the period. A major feature of Jones-Hogu’s artwork and of the AfriCOBRA style generally was her infusion of words into her images, allowing audiences to understand their meaning without ambiguity.

Her screenprint *Unite* from 1971 is her most recognizable artwork from that time, and was also included in the *Soul of a Nation* exhibition. It is a dramatic statement with the clear message “UNITE” that not only repeats in vivid colors throughout the composition, but also speaks to the entire African American population in the country. The male and female figures below the word stand aggressively with raised fists and determined expressions, another signifier of racial unity. This artwork, with its Black Power salute and Afro hairdos, signifies the pride and resolve that Black people required to challenge the oppressive racist society they were forced to endure. Jones continued to work artistically in Chicago using digital imagery and making documentary films until her death.

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David Hammons (1943–) is an internationally acclaimed and highly versatile visual artist whose early roots and work in Los Angeles established the foundation for his decades of artistic brilliance. A student of Charles White at the Otis Art Institute, he emulated his teacher's commitment to visual social commentary and criticism in his initial works. In Los Angeles, Hammons pioneered the technique of body prints, using his own body as the printing plate. He produced several works during the height of the civil rights era that were biting commentaries on American racial injustice. In these, he often used the U.S. flag to underscore how the ideals of that symbol bore little resemblance to the plight of Black people in racist America. His *Spade* series were satirical commentaries on the derogatory reference to Blacks as “spades.”

Hammons's 1970 *Injustice Case*, one of the finest political artworks of the mid to late twentieth century, refers to the infamous Chicago federal court trial of Black Panther Bobby Seale for conspiracy to incite violence. That work, also included in *Soul of a Nation*, pointedly depicts Seale bound and gagged in the courtroom—one of the most egregious examples of judicial misconduct in modern times. His *Door (Admission Office)* from 1969 shows a door at a college admissions office bearing an ink imprint of a black body against the glass, representing the barriers that African Americans faced then (and now) in entering institutions of higher learning. In the mid-1970s, Hammons moved to New York, where his remarkable sculptures, installations, performance works, and other artistic efforts have brought him international honors, including a prestigious MacArthur Foundation Fellowship.

Timothy Washington (1946–) grew up in the historically Black Watts section of Los Angeles and recalls collecting discarded objects even in childhood—the origin of his longtime reputation for excellence as an assemblage artist. Following his 1969 graduation from Chouinard Art Institute, he connected with the exciting developments in the Los Angeles Black visual art scene. Political and artistic agitation that demanded more African American inclusion in mainstream art institutions led to him being selected for the first exhibition featuring Black artists at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 1971: *Three Graphic Artists: Charles White, David Hammons, Timothy Washington*. He was the youngest of the trio and this exhibition marked his entry into the BAM.

In this historic exhibition, Washington displayed several works, most highly politically charged, including *Raw Truth*, *Why Poverty*, and *Ghetto*. In his *One Nation Under God*, also exhibited in *Soul of a Nation*, he visually proposed economic reparations for his fellow African Americans, an idea with contemporary resonance. He highlighted his unique formal innovation by creating a print on aluminum; thematically, he employed a mule, the signifier of the unfilled promise of 40 acres and a mule. Vigorously active in his seventies, Tim Washington works in the Leimert Park neighborhood of Los Angeles, where

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his home studio is a stunning visual treat, a veritable museum of magnificent art pieces on virtually every wall and ceiling.

Conclusion

Throughout the long and vibrant history of African American visual art, several periods have stood out for unusual bursts of creative energy and accomplishment. The Harlem Renaissance in the early twentieth century, for example, catalyzed a powerful expression of all artistic genres, including the visual arts. Likewise, the Depression era mobilized women and men to use their experiences to observe and comment on the effects of that national catastrophe on the lives and emotions of millions of Black Americans. African American visual artists again played a crucial role during those troubled times.

As this chapter has revealed, scores of Black visual artists were deeply involved in the Black Arts movement that lasted roughly from the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s. Indeed, even more Black artists than are mentioned here played powerful roles, including abstractionists like Emma Amos, Sam Gilliam, Al Loving, Jack Whitten, Joe Overstreet, William T. Williams, Frank Bowling, Daniel LaRue Johnson, Howardina Pindell, and many others. But no single chapter can be comprehensive and more scholarship clearly is required. The artists of the BAM played a huge role in inspiring their fellow artists to create in their own styles and with their own visions. They also inspired broader Black audiences and others of goodwill to confront the historical injustices that racism has wrought in this nation. That goal, in the early decades of the new century, is more urgent than ever before.