

## **Introduction to the *Two Centuries of Black American Art* Exhibition, 1976**

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In September 1976, LACMA presented what was then, as now, widely regarded as a groundbreaking exhibition, *Two Centuries of Black American Art*. As the fall “season opener” that year – the American Bicentennial year, with all its national festivities and commemorations – the exhibition was both a critical and popular success, generating much attention in the press locally, nationally, and internationally. Viewers generally acknowledged that it was the first historical survey of an artistic achievement that had been virtually ignored – or “scripted out” – of the standard accounts of American art history. They saw it as a fitting Bicentennial mission that both evidenced the existence of an all but invisible tradition, and signaled both the exclusionary cultural injustices of the past and an insistence that cultural politics and practices had to change in the future. The message was repeated, and received, as the exhibition toured to Atlanta, Dallas, and New York, and it indeed remains a watershed in our understanding of the long history of African American visual culture.

But the “back story” of the exhibition, at least in the context of LACMA’s short history when it opened as an independent museum in 1965 is, in ways, as fascinating as the main story the exhibition itself tells. Its genesis is exceptional in its own right – exceptional in that, unlike most museum exhibitions, which are the province of museum curators, who have the responsibility to propose and develop them, the impetus for *Two Centuries* emerged not out of any curator’s ongoing research but rather arose as a grass-roots movement among LACMA’s largely black guard force, then comprised of LA County Sheriff’s deputies, led by Sergeant William Knight, and two black members of the museum’s art installation crew, Cecil Ferguson and Claude Booker. What began as casual if nonetheless politically and culturally motivated coffee-break chats quickly evolved into meetings with sympathetic curators and educators, and subsequently with upper level administrators and the director. The museum administration encouraged the formation of a black-community-based task force to consider the issues of the representation of African American art in both the museum’s collections and exhibition programs and the engagement – or more accurately the striking lack of engagement – of the museum with the black community, and vice versa. Thus the Black Arts Council was formed in the year 1968, comprised of African American artists, collectors, scholars, journalists, and other interested parties.

The Black Arts Council itself was anomalous within LACMA’s other support councils, most of which consist of museum members who pay additional dues to join volunteer groups that serve various museum functions (such as conducting docent tours, manning the information kiosks, or helping in the library) or that are affiliated with particular curatorial departments to support their research, curatorial travel, exhibitions, programs, and acquisitions. In return for council members’ dues, museum curators offer such council member benefits as educational programs, exclusive guided tours of featured exhibitions, field trips, and travel opportunities. When all of this works out to everyone’s satisfaction, lasting bonds are often formed between curatorial departments and their dedicated supporters.

The Black Arts Council, by contrast, was formed in the void left by the museum’s and the black community’s lack of involvement with each other. But as the council had virtually no

institutional functionaries to deal with, no department or ongoing program to actually support, and only the museum's professed good faith to foster vague cultural and social values that were otherwise drastically undernourished in American society, the Black Arts Council more or less evaporated after about seven years. The known records of the council's proceedings are scant and sketchy. But the combined efforts of the ad hoc, grass-roots advocacy of the guards and the installers, as well as the social conscience exerted by the very existence of the Black Arts Council, did demonstrably bring about LACMA's organization of the first major historical exhibition of African American art at any major museum.

Former LACMA assistant museum educator for special exhibitions Bridget R. Cooks, now assistant professor of Art History and of African American Studies at University of California, Irvine, has written on the history of representation of black art, artists, and culture in American museums in her forthcoming book *Exhibiting Blackness: African Americans and the American Art Museum*, (University of Massachusetts Press, forthcoming 2011). Of course, *Two Centuries of Black American Art* figures prominently in her study, with its own chapter, "Filling the Void: Two Centuries of Black American Art (1976)" early in her treatise. An excerpt from that chapter is reproduced here as an authoritative account and astute critique of the exhibition and its genesis, and it serves as the scholarly underpinning of LACMA's Archives Project to document presentations that remain of special significance in the history of its exhibition programming.