new dawn for black american artists

BY WILLIAM WILSON

In the past two decades, Afro-Americans have at least attained some measure of discernability. In the '60s we even began to hear about persons called "Black Artists," who seemed to have emerged spontaneously from the cultural yeast of the period.

In actual fact, they are part of an invisible history that is about to gain substance when an exhibition called "Two Centuries of Black American Art" opens Thursday, September 30, at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. It will include over 200 works by more than 65 artists.

The history of the Afro-American contribution to the nation's plastic arts runs precisely parallel to the roadbed of American art. When the country was young, a predominance of its esthetic energy was funneled into crafting utilitarian objects. Skillful slaves functioned as ironsmiths, silversmiths, furniture makers and couturiers.

They remained invisible through anonymity.

Our greatest painter of the poetry of wildlife is widely acknowledged to be John James Audubon. Most people don't know he was black—born of a mulatto servant, subsequently adopted by his father. Invisibility through ignorance.

Edward Michael Bannister was a black artist who painted well in Barbizon-landscape style. When he tried to visit his own exhibition at the Philadelphia 1876 Centennial, he was, at first, refused admission.

That is the kind of invisibility that came from an arrogant assumption that black people couldn't make "white" art.

By the time we had grown stable and sophisticated enough to produce art based on historic European models, white artists like John Singer Sargeant cut an international swath. So did American black artists like Henry O. Tanner, who studied with Thomas Eakins and won prizes in the Paris Salon.

Tanner resented receiving recognition as a "black artist"—as if the combination were an oddity—so he decamped for Europe, where he was judged, quite highly, on his personal merit.

When we developed a native vision like the Hudson River School, black America contributed such an artist as Robert Scott Duncanson, whose style eventually was mixed with classical subjects partly inspired by a year-long stay in Italy.

Duncanson, Bannister and Tanner seldom treated the racial issue in their art. Although often invisible to whites, they were heroes to their people.

A few others were more direct. Edmonia Lewis was not only talented, she had the difficult distinction of belonging to four minorities, being part Negro, part American Indian, a woman and an artist.

Ms. Lewis' sculpture, "The Dying Cleopatra," was a hit of the 1876 exhibition and received an award. One wonders how many admiring viewers saw an allegorical point. Cleopatra was, after all, black. The cantankerous lady constantly identified her work with abolitionist causes. She was a pioneer in dealing with racial injustice in art. Such themes did not become the core of black American art until the 1920s and '30s.

The LACMA exhibition will demonstrate this parallel development up to modern times in such styles as the heroic realism of Californian Charles White, the primitive-cum-modernist work of Jacob Lawrence and some near-abstraction by Romare Bearden.

The period extending from the early 1920s is often called the Negro Renaissance. The art continued to parallel the American esthetic mainstream in various combinations of folk style, patterned Cubism a la Picasso or Stuart Davis, then Regionalism and the scale art of the WPA, a boon to black artists.

Heroes of the long-dawning period included urban folk-stylist Palmer Hayden, Aaron Douglas, Californian Sargent Johnson, who combined modernist forms with African themes, a true primitive like Horace Pippin and a schematized neo-primitive like Jacob Lawrence.

Some of the success of this renaissance came from the growing recognition of black cultural achievements in other arts and in athletics, and in part from black intellectuals like Alain Locke and leaders like Marcus Garvey. Throughout, however, the black esthetic was shaped by the attenuated longings of the white avant-garde who wanted to see the Negro as a survivor of the "noble savage" myth.

They projected desires for vigor and exoticism on a black America that was imagined as "indulgent, passionate, mysterious, sexy and savage," according to the exhibition's originator, Professor David C. Driscoll, Fisk University art department chairman. Driscoll must be credited with a catalog essay that is deeply researched, tough, detached and readable.

We can't be quite sure yet how "Two Centuries of Black American Art" will look. Driscoll quotes plenty of criticism from inside, including Romare Bearden's 1934 diatribe against black artists' timidity and rehashings, calling their work "hackneyed and uninspired" and saying they had, "evolved nothing original or native like the spiritual or jazz music."

The exhibition is likely to take some heat from insiders for ending its survey with artists who were established by the '50s. That predictable criticism will be far outweighed by the demonstration that our black art has a history, and sadly, that simple, weighty fact will be in the nature of a revelation for most of the audience.

Preview glimpses of exhibition materials suggest that, at worst, we will see sound works of American art. We will certainly see a Bicentennial event that will make firmly tangible the invisible history of our black artists.

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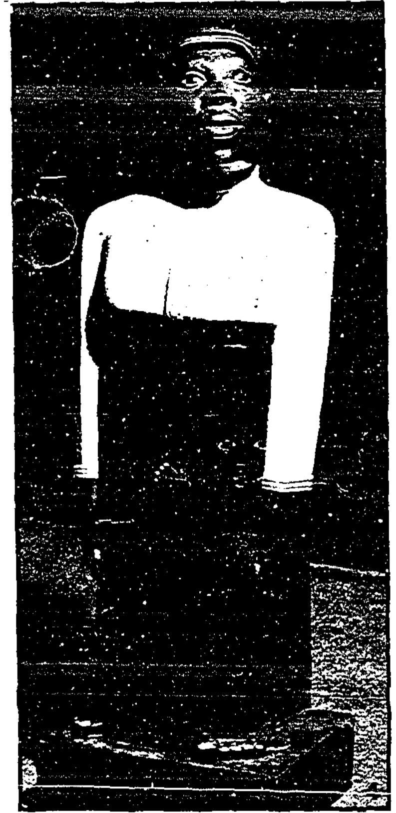
1. Black American artists remained racially indiscernable in such paintings as this 1862 "Falls of Minnehaha" by Robert S. Duncanson.

2. A detail from "The Good Shepherd" by Henry O. Tanner, an heroic patriarch in the history of black art. Tanner moved to Europe, where he developed a stylistically cautious combination of Academic art and Impressionism that is exemplified in this painting.

3. Jacob Lawrence's "Tombstones" shows the genre style influenced by modern abstract painting.

4. Californian Sargent Johnson studied with San Francisco's Benny Bufano. This is Johnson's best-known sculpture "Forever Free" reflecting a combination of modernist simplification and ethnic themes typical of the Africanist movement.

5. Urban ghetto life is reflected in the art of the Negro Renaissance of the 1920s and '30s, as in this folk-style painting, "Midsummer Night in Harlem" by Palmer Hayden.



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