Against the Grain:
The Commitment of Katharine Hepburn

BY MARILYN STASIO

- Some things we know about her: She has ravishing cheekbones and a voice that melts lead. In the 1940s, with Spencer Tracy, she made some imperishable movies. She once tramped across the RKO Studio lot in her underpants to work, and still works on her own legend. The question now is: Has Katharine Hepburn become the indomitable creature she portrays on stage in "A Matter of Gravity?"

In Enid Bagnold's comedy, opening Wednesday at the Ahmanson, Hepburn plays a formidable dowager who lives alone in a decaying mansion, single-handedly shielding her vast estate from the encroachments of modern life. Wielding her traditional values like a battle-ax, Mrs. Basil triumphantly defends her beleaguered principles of class, property, family, wealth, morality and religion. The younger generation—en efete and affected lot of boomers and boors—doesn't stand a chance.

Are these cold, effete creatures really representative of the modern world outside Mrs. Basil's house?

Sure. "Why not?" Hepburn bristles. "I know a lot of people like that outside this house."

This house is hers. A splendidly dimensioned townhouse in East Manhattan's Turtle Bay; it smells green from the garden beyond the living room. The wood floors gleam warmly and the lights are soft. An inviting house.

It's been robbed so often that Hepburn has stopped

Please Turn to Page 65

Warm Optimism in 'Sounder 2'

BY CHARLES CHAMPLIN

- What gives Robert Redford a unique place amid that small and dwindling band of strongly independent film producers who leave their signatures on everything they do is not only that he makes family films, but also that he is a prophet of social responsibility and social optimism in a somber time.

His characters may not win big but they keep coming out ahead in struggles that are worth fighting. In the broadest terms, the battle is to become a wiser person living a better life in an improved world. Sometimes the rough passages are simply parts of growing up and coming of age; sometimes the adult world imposes on its follies and injustices.

The risk Redford forever runs in choosing and doing his material is of getting preachy or of idealizing his people and their successes beyond the dreams of possibility. He minimizes the risk. I suspect quite con-

Please Turn to Page 64

'Black American Art': Crossing the Color Line

BY HENRY J. SELDIS

- In attempting to approach "Two Centuries of Black American Art" at the County Museum of Art primarily from an aesthetic rather than from a historical point of view, it becomes clear that even the least edifying of the objects here were created against the almost insurmountable odds of racism and bigotry. Revelatory about this massive display are the instances of individual artistic genius that it offers, often by artists who would surely be far more familiar to us were it not for the color of their skin.

The first gallery of this mammoth exhibition contains clear evidence of the African heritage of enslaved artists and artisans who created everything from pottery to architecture. The struggle for ever greater equality comes into play, especially in the paintings and sculpture of the first half of this century. But it is the artistic highlights—regardless of subject matter—to which my

Please Turn to Page 64

BY HENRI GHEINT

- The County Museum of Art has taken a gigantic step in an effort to close the long-existing gap with regard to the paucity of scholarly documentation of black Americans' significant contribution to America's growing art heritage.

The reference, of course, is to the impressively mounted exhibition, "Two Centuries of Black American Art," in the Frances and Armand Hammer Wing of the museum. The exhibition, made possible through grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities and Philip Morris, Inc., will remain on view through Nov. 21.

"Two Centuries of Black American Art," a comprehensive survey of 200 years of visual creativity by Afro-Americans, is the summing result of an extraordinary professional collaboration between Prof. David C. Driskell, black chairman of the department of art at Fisk University, Nashville, Tenn., and

Please Turn to Page 64
‘Black American Art’: Crossing the Color Line

Continued from First Page

attention is drawn to how the works of the master painters and sculptors included here showed strong affinities to the work of their white American and European predecessors and contemporaries. Prof. David Driskell of Yale University, guest curator, specifies in his enlightening catalogue that it is the aim of this exhibition “to make available a more accurate comprehension of American art by documenting the quality of a body of work that should never have been cut apart as a separate entity.”

Before turning to the ingenuity of individual artists shown here, it must be said that—with few exceptions—America’s black artists up to the 1950s chose to deal in representational or representationalist rather than abstract, modernist abstract, or abstract expressionist in 20th-century painting and sculpture so much influenced by African art. This may well stem from a desire to be narrative in the work. It is a real progress that many of the youngest black artists (unfortunately not included here) have felt free to turn to abstraction, become entirely subjective and reject the separatist attitudes fervently embraced by their immediate ancestors.

The anonymity that cloaked most of the earliest black artists working in America to come to the end with the emergence of portraitist Joshua Johnson, a freed slave, whose early 19th-century portraiture was widely sought in Maryland. Although his work bears a certain resemblance to the portraiture painted by many members of the early 19th-century portraiture family, there is a very distinctive personal approach to be found in such masterpieces as ‘The McCormick Family’ and ‘The Carver Family’—the presence of the portraits gives it a special charm, relating it to the limners of colonial times.

The preeminence of John James Audubon as America’s finest painter of birds and wildlife has never been challenged, but the fact of the largest black American black painter is something that comes as a surprise even to those who knew that he briefly studied in France with Jacques-Louis David and in England with Thomas Girtin. Highly prolific, he was one of only a few whose superbly detailed paintings a city of Victorian portraiture.

One of the most admirable entries here is the smallest, Patrick Reason’s tiny etching, “Kneeling Slave” (executed in 1833), projects a monumental dignity despite its minimal scale.

While the work of Robert S. Duncan, which first emerged in an 1842 exhibition in Cincinnati, has often been compared to that of Thomas Cole, the work that in the 1820s went on to become one of the more influential figures in the romantic Hudson River School of landscape painting. Duncan’s paintings, especially those that reflect his European travels, do not share the allegorical aspect of that school. Only the earliest of his works on view concern itself with a black theme. It is a pity that in the figures in “Uncle Tom and Little Eva” seem to have merely been inserted—a somewhat awkwardly—into one of his typical landscapes.

There is a greater concern for most of the landscapes of another sort: the 19th-century black painter, Edward Mitchell Bannister. His heavily loaded brush evolved an idiom greatly influenced by British landscape, including Constable, and by his American contemporaries who admired the landscapes of the French Barbizon School.

The single most memorable experience this exhibition offered me is the opportunity to become better acquainted with the work of Henry O. Tanner. There is no doubt that he was a 19th-century painter of first rank whose often mystical compositions drew him a large following from the realism of William Edmondson, whom he greatly admired.

Dealing lyrically yet powerfully with biblical subjects, he absorbed the rich traditions of European influences, including those of Edward Munch and Vincent Van Gogh, to create a pictorial language distinguished by its mystical forms and flat, newly textured picture surface evocative of Ryder. In the process of cleaning the LACMA’s “Daniel in the Lion’s Den,” the museum’s conservation department made an extraordinary discovery: the presence of an older Tanner oil of a biblical scene under the “Daniel” which had been painted on paper. The spiritual intensity Tanner achieved is most powerfully demonstrated in “Daniel,” “The Two Disciples at the Tomb” and “The Three Men.”

Like Tanner, Edmonia Lewis, the first black woman sculptor in America, lived much of her life in Europe. It is unfortunate that none of this century’s most outstanding artists’ works symbolizing the black experience are included in this show which gives an insight into her neo-classical style. A sharp contrast exists among these stylized art forms, the direct, folk feeling of the amazing, archetypal stone pieces by self-taught artist William Edmondson and the utter sophistication of the sculptures by Richard Burtch, by far the most accomplished sculptor in this survey. In contrast, Susan Johnson’s sculpture suffers from a ramshackle eclecticism.

Outstanding among the paintings of the so-called “Negro Renaissance” of the 20s are the vivid genre scenes by Palmer Hayden, the powerful stylizations created by Aaron Douglas, the evocative collages and paintings by Romare Bearden—whose cultural, novel abstract “Gardens of Babylon” comes as a delightful surprise—and the powerfully colored and brilliantly patterned temperas and gouaches by Jacob Lawrence.

Despite his insistence on traditional, even academic, means, Charles White, one of the black artists who have emerge in America, Horace Pippin could surely hold his own with any of them and to far more personal in his expressions than most. There is a special treat also in the patterned mixed media sculptural fantasies offered by David Butler.

It is regrettable that the exhibition’s organizers chose to include only these artists who had reached fairly wide recognition by 1950, although some are represented by far more recent works. This exhibition cries out for a stoped composed of works by black artists of great talent who emerged in America during the past 30 years.

As important a historical contribution as is undoubtedly being made by “Two Centuries of Black American Art” is its determined separation gives us pause. Perhaps the time has come to consider the passionate plea to Page 62.

LACMA Takes a Giant Step for Black Heritage

Continued from First Page

the museum’s deputy director, Roderick Streid. To this black writer’s knowledge, there have only been two previous attempts (“The Evolution of Afro-American Art” 1960-1962) at Clark College in 1967, and “Selections of 19th-Century Black Artists” at the Metropolitan Museum last June) to fill the void in visual history that has existed for so long. It is hoped that it will be filled at the Museum exhibition, as well as the generous corporate and governmental support it received, sets a much-needed precedent for all major art projects in the future.

Yet, in the last decade as was briefly the case in the 1920s has the black artist’s achievement and potential as a creative artist commanded more than cursory interest on the part of the art establishment in America—or—for that matter, other artists. Without question, this recent recognition in visual creativity by blacks can only be attributed to the advent of the Black Consciousness movement—sociocultural movement that did indeed have some positive effects.

In addition to casting blacks to renew their pride in their African heritage, it also elevated the black artist from his “Invisible” status. Their ambitions were formed otherwise. They protested against Eastern cultural institutions for their remittance in actively viewing, exhibiting and acquiring the works of the black artist. But in the meantime, the conscience of museums, colleges and universities from coast to coast had been rooted.

Unfortunately, the call to support black culture was not examined by the black art and the well-anticipated exhibition, as the single most important was before absolute recognition. The call for individual excellence was the philosophy that inculcated us with so-called “black art” shows for nearly a decade.

This period in contemporary American history—like the arrival, in 1819, of the first group of 20 indentured servants in Jamestown, Va., was to further add to the course of every black American life—especially those whose talents and aspirations dictate the pursuit of a career in the field of arts.

There are several reasons why visual creativity by Afro-Americans has gone unnoticed so long by art historians, establishment museums and art dealers—and among these are the misinterpreters of African art; the myth that blacks were culturally atavistic. This myth had been carefully nurtured by America’s own stereotypes and perceptions that they could not be legally and aesthetically human. As a result, they were renounced and unknown, rarely receiving credit for what they produced, artistically.

Even those who rightfully conclude that an American achievement that under 30 million people must have an active constituency are even now found guilty of assuming that this black artistic element is circumscribed to the interpretive and emotional arts—not most notably music and dance.

It must be remembered that the Afro-American is endowed with an extremely rich cultural heritage. His African ancestors have created for centuries sculptures, songs, stories of great beauty and technical superiority that also had profound spiritual connotation. Moreover, it is common knowledge that African art was instrumental in helping to shape the course of modern art. How, then, can one appreciate Picasso and Modigliani without understanding the derivation of their forms? One would naturally assume that art historians, as well as art collectors, would curiously look to their African predecessors for an understanding of African art, for an extension of this vitality in art.

But how, after all, “Two Centuries of Black American Art” succeeds mightily in accomplishing the

Please Turn to Page 65

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Crossing Color Line

Continued from Page 64

The black artist-teaching Raymond Saunders, who insists that “racial hangups are extraneous to art. No artist can afford to let them obscure what runs through all art—the living soul and the ever-growing aesthetic record of human, spiritual and intellectual experience. Can’t we get clear of these degrading limitations, and recognize the wider reality of art, where color is the means and not the end?”

Following the Los Angeles showing, which concludes Nov. 21, the exhibition will travel to museums in Atlanta, Dallas and Brooklyn.

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The lighting and active) who had obtained professional status between 1930 and 1950 is the 75-year-old sculptor, Richmond Bartlett. His inclusion in this selective survey is an honor well-deserved.

It was equally apt that one of the organizers to include some works of Sergeant Johnson, the late San Francisco sculptor whose polychrome wood sculpture, “Forever Free,” virtually steals any show in which it is included. Haie Woodruff, the dean of black American painters, is represented by two large, colorful abstractions, while the canvases of Archibald Motley, Aaron Douglas, Jacob Lawrence, Romare Bearden, Alma Thomas, Horace Pippin, Minnie Evans, Eldzier Cortor and Norman Lewis held their own most dependably.

The handsome, informative catalogue prepared by Prof. Dinkell (very ably assisted by Leonard Simon, a black art historian) is a must for every art library.

Genth, a black New York-based writer-art critic, is former director of the Brooklyn Museum’s innovative Community Gallery.

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