

CALENDAR

LOS ANGELES TIMES

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Darryl Young and his dog, Sounder in scene from "Part 2, Sounder," opening at selected theaters Friday.

Warm Optimism in 'Sounder 2'

BY CHARLES CHAMPLIN

● What gives Robert Radnitz 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 per-

son living a better life in an improved world. Sometimes the rough passages are simply part of growing up and coming of age; sometimes the adult world impinges with its follies and injustices.

The risk Radnitz 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-

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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 traipsed across the RKO Studio lot in her underpants. At 67, she's still working 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 traditionalist values like a battle-ax, Mrs. Basil triumphantly defends her beleaguered principles of class, property, family, wealth, morality and religion. The younger generation—an effete and affected lot of boobs and bores—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 46*

'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 black struggle for ever greater equality comes into play, especially in the paintings and sculptures of the first half of this century. But it is to the artistic highlights—regardless of subject matter—to which my

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"The McCormick Family" was painted by Joshua Johnson, a freed slave.

BY HENRI GHENT

● 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 stunning results 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

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attention is drawn.

The earliest of the masterly painters and sculptors included here showed strong affinities to the work of their white American and European predecessors and contemporaries. Prof. David Driskell of Fisk University, guest curator, specifies in his enlightening catalogue that it is the aim of this exhibition "to make available a more accurate compendium of American art by documenting the quality of a body of work that should never have been set 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 referential idioms rather than accept predominant abstract emphases in 20th-century painting and sculpture so much influenced by African art. This may well stem from a desire to be narrative in their work. It is a mark of real progress that many of the youngest black artists (unfortunately not included here) have felt free to turn to abstraction, to become entirely subjective and to reject the separatist attitudes fervently embraced by their immediate ancestors.

The anonymity that cloaked most of the earliest black artists working in America came to the end with the emergence of portraitist Joshua Johnston, a freed slave, whose late 18th- and early 19th-century portraiture was widely sought in Maryland. Although his work bears a certain resemblance to the portraiture produced by the many artists of the Peale-Polk family, there is a very distinctively personal approach to be found in such masterly compositions as "The McCormick Family" and "Young Lady on a Red Sofa." Perhaps the very stiffness of some of his portraiture 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 Haitian-born artist's black ancestry comes as a surprise even to those who knew that he briefly studied in France with Jacques-Louis David and in England with Thomas Sully. Regrettably, he is represented here by only one of his works, a superb plate dynamically depicting a covey of Virginian partridges.

One of the most admirable entries here is the smallest, Patrick Reason's tiny engraving, "Kneeling Slave" (executed in 1835), projects a monumentality of design and feeling entirely opposite to its actual scale.

While the work of Robert S. Duncanson, which first emerged in an 1842 exhibition in Cincinnati, has often been compared to that of Thomas Cole, who worked in that city in the 1820s and went on to become one of the key figures of the romantic Hudson River School of landscape painting, Duncanson 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 concerns itself with a black theme but here the figures in "Uncle Tom and Little Eva" seem to have merely been inserted—somewhat awkwardly—into one of his typical landscapes.

There is a greater somberness in most of the landscapes of another foremost 19th-century black painter, Edward Mitchell Bannister. His heavily loaded brush evolved an idiom greatly influenced by British landscapists, 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 great distance from the realism of Thomas Eakins, whom he greatly admired.

Dealing lyrically yet powerfully with biblical subjects, Tanner absorbed a number of European influences, including those of Edvard Munch and Vincent Van Gogh, to create a pictorial language distinguished by its mystical power and flat, richly textured picture surface evocative of Ryder. In the process of



"Head of a Woman" by Richard Barthe is in "Two Centuries of Black American Art" at LACMA.

cleaning the LACMA's "Daniel in the Lions' 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 Marys."

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 eccentric artist's 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 artifacts, 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 Barthe, by far the most accomplished sculptor in this survey. In contrast Sargent Johnson's sculpture suffers from a rampant eclecticism.

Outstanding among the paintings of the so-called "Negro Renaissance" of the '30s are the vivid genre scenes by Palmer Hayden, the powerful stylizations created by Aaron Douglas, the evocative collages and paintings by Romare Bearden—whose textural, near 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, dean of California's black artists, does manage—at his best—to stir us with his visual messages, which are always related to the plight of his people. But it took the oldest of the living artists represented here, the octogenarian, Alma W. Thomas, to emerge with powerfully colored abstractions—very much her own. When it comes to the top self-taught artists who have emerged in America, Horace Pippin could surely hold his own with any of them and be far more personal in his expressions than most. There is a special zest also in the painted mixed media sculptural fantasies offered by David Butler.

It is regrettable that the exhibition's organizers chose to include only those artists who had reached fairly wide recognition by 1950, although some are represented by far more recent works. This exhibition cries out for a sequel composed of works by black artists of great talent who emerged in America during the past 25 years.

As important a historical contribution as is undoubtedly being made by "Two Centuries of Black American Art," its determined separatism gives us pause. Perhaps the time has come to consider the passionate

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LACMA Takes a Giant Step for Black Heritage

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the museum's deputy director, Rexford Stead. To this black writer's knowledge, there have only been two previous attempts ("The Evolution of Afro-American Artists: 1800-1950," at New York's City College in 1967, and "Selections of 19th-Century Black Artists" at the Metropolitan Museum last June) to fill the void in visual documentation. But in neither case can it be said that the end result could begin to rival the expertise and dedication brought to the County Museum of Art show by Driskell and Stead. This observation is especially true in terms of consummate style, scholarly research and a kind of panache that one seldom encounters in exhibitions dealing with art created by blacks. One trusts that the current 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.

Only in the last decade (as was briefly the case in the 1920s) has the black American'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 blacks. Without question, this resurgence of interest in visual creativity by blacks can only be attributed to the advent of the "Black Consciousness" movement—a social revolution that did indeed have many positive features.

In addition to causing blacks to renew their pride in their African heritage, it also elevated the black artist from his "Invisible American" status almost overnight. They protested against Eastern cultural institutions for their remissness in actively viewing, exhibiting and acquiring the works of qualitative black artists. Clearly, the conscience of museums, colleges and universities from coast to coast had been roused.

Unfortunately, the so-called gestures of recognition were, for the most part, sociologically and/or politically motivated, leaving the quality black artists in the same predicament as before because absolutely no concern for individual excellence was exercised by the institutions that inundated us with so-called "black art" shows for nearly a decade.

This period in contemporary American history—like the arrival, in 1619, of the first group of 20 indentured servants in Jamestown, Va., was to further shape the course of every black American's life—especially those whose talents and aspirations dictate the pursuit of a career in the area of fine arts.

There are several reasons why visual creativity by Afro-Americans had gone unnoticed so long by art historians, Establishment museums, art dealers and critics—the most egregious being the uncritical myth that blacks were creatively bankrupt. This myth had been carefully nurtured by America's own stereotyped presentation of blacks in all media as an ineffectual (but jovial) segment of American society, not to be dealt with on a human level. As a result, they were rendered faceless and unknown, rarely receiving credit for what they produced, artistically.

Even those who rightfully conclude that an American subculture of more than 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—most notably music and dance.

It must be remembered that the Afro-American is endowed with an extremely rich cultural heritage, his African ancestors having created for centuries sculptural works 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 connoisseurs, would curiously look to Afro-American artists, as direct descendants of this African heritage, for an extension of this vitality in art.

By sheer quality alone, "Two Centuries of Black American Art" succeeds mightily in controverting the

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A Giant Step

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commonly held notion that "fine art" in the Western tradition is the exclusive domain of whites. Regrettably, space does not allow more than the briefest mention of even the most accomplished participants. However, this writer feels secure in saying that this exhibition, while certainly not perfect, easily rates as one of considerable importance, historically and aesthetically.

It is indeed worth repeating that Joshua Johnston (ca.1765-1830), the first known black portraitist, continues to impress me with his engagingly inelastic, flat style that earned him a substantial reputation among the wealthiest white families in the Baltimore area.

Robert S. Duncanson (1821-72), a landscapist; Edmonia Lewis (1845-1900), the formidable neo-classical sculptor who dominated the American expatriate colony in Rome for 17 years; Edward M. Bannister (1828-1901), also a landscapist, who steadily gains stature among early American masters, clearly demonstrate that they embraced the same stylistic and aesthetic concerns as their white counterparts.

Henry O. Tanner (1859-1937), long considered the most celebrated of all black American painters, is represented by several of his most inspired canvases, including his "The Three Marys," "Daniel in the Lions' Den" and the exciting discovery of an untitled painting found when the "Daniel" canvas was being cleaned.

Among the group of artists (many of whom are liv-

ing and active) who had obtained professional status between 1920 and 1950 is the 76-year-old sculptor, Richmond Barthe. His inclusion in this selective survey is an honor well-deserved.

It was equally prudent on the part of the organizer to include some works of Sargent Johnson, the late San Francisco sculptor whose polychrome wood sculpture, "Forever Free," virtually steals any show in which it is included. Hale 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. Driskell (very ably assisted by Leonard Simon, a black art historian) is a must for every art library.

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

Crossing Color Line

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plea by the black artist-teacher 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 root 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.

Norman Rockwell

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