new dawn for black american artists

BY WILLIAM WILSON

The LACMA exhibition will demonstrate this parallel development up to modern times in such styles as the heroic realism of Calvin B. Charles and Charles White, the primitive-cum-modernist work of Jacob Lawrence and the niche-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, 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 and a true primitivism 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 artists like Alain Locke and leaders like Marcus Garvey. Throughout, however, the black aesthetic 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 easier to deal with than the demonstration that our black art has a history, and, sadly, that simple, weighty, and old fashioned in the nature of a revelation for most of the audience. Preview people.

Ms. Lewis' sculpture, "The Dying Cleopatra," was a hit of the 1876 exhibition and received an award. One wonders how many admiring viewers saw the 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.
1. Black American artists remained racially indistinguishable in such paintings as this 1902 “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.