

Trustee Support

Former Trustee, Robert Wilson, Remembers

In the early 1970s the idea of an exhibition of the art of Black Americans in the 18th and 19th centuries was floating around at LACMA. In response to this, the trustees of the museum asked the curatorial staff to consider the concept. The museum director, Kenneth Donahue, at a later meeting informed the trustees “that the idea had been considered and there would not be a Black historical exhibition.” To say the least, the trustees were disappointed, and on their own they took steps to have such an exhibition. Franklin Murphy was able to identify a curator, David Driskell, who at that time was teaching art and art history at Fisk University.

Sidney Brody was able to get Phillip Morris as the principal sponsor. Rexford Stead, who at the time was Deputy Director of LACMA was placed in charge of the exhibition, a task which he assumed with great enthusiasm. And, he was able to secure additional funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities.

I do not think there was racial bias against such an exhibition on the part of the curatorial staff. It was just a subject they knew little about and, at that time, there was very little written on the subject in general. The catalogue gives credit for the idea to Claude Booker, who was a museum preparator at the time. And I think David and Rex came up with the title *Two Centuries of Black American Art*. The exhibition would not have happened were it not for the trustees’ direct actions. I still do not know why their names were not listed in the catalogue. I assume it was that in addition to being a catalogue for the exhibition, it was also to be used as a text book. The entire museum membership (22,000+) received a copy and admission to the exhibition was free. Prior to the exhibition, LACMA had one masterpiece that qualified for the exhibition, [*Daniel in the Lion’s Den*](#), which came to LACMA from the William Preston Harrison Collection. When it was removed from its frame to be cleaned, a second Tanner was found. The second was not in the exhibition.*

At this time, in addition to being a LACMA trustee, I was a member of the Graphic Arts Council, and was able to convince the Council to commission Charles White to do a print. White was one of the few living artists included in the exhibition and lived and worked in Los Angeles. It turned out to be one of the council’s most successful commissioned prints. White’s image, entitled [*I have a Dream*](#), was used for the poster of the exhibition.

I do not recall whose idea it was for the lecture, film and performing arts series, nor do I recall how I became in charge of it, but I do recall how much I enjoyed working on it.

The modest printed program for the lecture, film and performing arts series grossly understated the scope and the cooperation of the museum and the community which organized and funded the series. I would like to give special recognition to some entities which made the series such a memorable success.

From the Museum: Ron Haver who assembled an outstanding Black Film Festival and Lawrence Morton who organized the music series with great skill and flair.

From the community: Betty Cox of the BEEM Foundation [Black Experience as Expressed through Music], who presented some gems of early jazz and blues, and Frances Adkins of Hamilton High School, who wrote and produced an original play for the exhibition using her drama students. And, not least, the various other businesses, organizations and individuals who funded the program.

Robert Wilson
November 22, 2010

*“Although [Tanner’s [*Daniel in the Lion’s Den*](#)] is on paper, it probably was not intended as a sketch but as an independent, second version [of [*Daniel in the Lions’ Den*](#)]. (In 1976 the canvas used to back the museum’s painting was found to have on it an unfinished oil possibly illustrating a scene from the life of Job and able to be dated on stylistic grounds to the late 1890s or early years of the 1900s.)”

Fort, Ilene Susan and Michael Quick. *American Art: a Catalogue of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art Collection*. Los Angeles: Museum Associates, 1991. pp. 226.