

On their Walls: African American Art by African American Collectors
Ellarslie, The Trenton City Museum
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*“The rituals of black memory represent a form of cultural resistance; memory implies a certain redemption.” (W. Fitzhugh Bundage, *The Souther Past*, 2006).*

The art collector plays a vital role in the art world. While many people collect art for investment purposes or because the work appeals to them, it is the collector who adds value to the work. This is significant for African American art collectors, who collect art to showcase culture, confirm its value, and support artists who are typically undervalued. This exhibition explores the validation of artwork and the importance of cultural dialogue through art. The works are created by a mix of recognizable African American artists and lesser known but equally important artists.

The works for this exhibition were selected from the collections of African American women. The African American experience and a woman’s presence in it is exemplified through many of the works, both explicitly and covertly. Other themes include tradition and ritual as well as the home.

At the pinnacle of this exhibition are five large serigraphs by Romare Bearden from the *Prevalence of Ritual Portfolio* created in 1974. Bearden is one of America’s eminent artists of the 20th century and his work, predominantly with collages, was a testament to the struggle, strength, beauty and meaning of the African American experience. These five serigraphs tells stories of women from the Bible; stories of Eve, Deliah, and Salome as well as Noah and Troy. Each piece uses vibrant colors and identifiable visual language to convey a message of tradition and value.

The visual connotations of bright color and the female figure can also be found in the works of Mercy Moyo, Ellen Powell Tiberino, Mickalene Thomas, and Alonzo Adams. Mercy Moyo uses African female figures as a symbol of strength and value, reflecting the rituals and culture of her native Zimbabwe. Tiberino, Thomas, and Adams use images of women in their personal narrative to convey a message of strength and value of African American women and culture.



“The Dancers” Mercy Moyo, collage

Portraiture is a very specific work, looking at the portrayal on a unique person. It is in the style and creation of portraits that artist’s intent and experience is evident. While Tiberino creates an image of a specific woman she conveys a message about all African American women, strength and pride is understood through her bold lines and powerful gestures. Gittens and Tanksley use faceless

images to move from individualized experiences and open their work to the notions of the figures representing not a single child or woman but all children and women.



“Sister Gaze” Alonzo Adams, Charcoal on Paper

“Misunderstanding” Louis Delsarte, Oil on Canvas

There are many mediums represented in this exhibition; painting, drawing, and collage. Collage allows the artist to bring the realities of life to the work. Not only does the artist have the opportunity to create imagery of shared experience one can literally paste a shared image to their work. Bearden used collage to combine the shared images of African Americans in media to create unique stories and situations on his canvas. Collage is not specific to images, Mickalene Thomas uses fabric and rhinestone to embellish her canvas, examining beauty and pop culture. Delsarte, Pickett, and Biggers also use a collage of textures and styles to create work that reflects the multidimensionality of the African American experience.



“You Gonna Give Me the Love I Need”, Mickalene Thomas, Mixed Media

Another recurring medium in this exhibition is watercolor. It is used to create images of home and familiar landscapes. Both Dean Mitchell and Tom Malloy create beautiful watercolor paintings of buildings and landscape in their surroundings. Malloy is known for his dreamlike renderings of the Trenton cityscape. Richard Mayhew, a member of Spiral with Bearden, also creates dreamlike landscapes. His abstracted landscape reflects the mood and energy of the American landscape. These three artists use the land and environment to convey similar messages to the artist who use figures and portraits.



“A Landscape for Bob”, Richard Mayhew, Serigraph

The collectors of the works in this exhibition collect works that affects the resilience, beauty, and joy and African Americans. Diane Ciccone, the owner of “Survivors” by Ann Tanksley, sees the

power of resilience of women in Tanksley's work, specifically of women standing together in a slave pen. She finds this poignantly appropriate "now as the killing of black men, women and children is being raised in the consciousness of all Americans. *Survivors* reflects how we survived the horrors of slavery, forced sales of splitting up our families and the suppression of our culture. The image is a reminder that we are survivors in this wilderness of human atrocity, against one another."

Collector, Zandra Maffett collects works with themes of people or that are reminiscent of her childhood in North Philadelphia. She purchases her works directly from artists in order to help fund their practice. Jane Malloy, niece of watercolorist Tom Malloy, recalls her uncle's profound connection to God and nature. He once said "Artists are by nature lovers of nature, but some of us are drawn into the city by the security and compactness of people coming together."

Diana Tyson is an avid collector of African and African America art; she also has a role in nurturing young African artists like Mercy Moyo. She states that her "collection reflects [her] life: experiences that [she] has had, social commentary, and flight of fantasy inspired by abstract works."