

the time is always now: artists reframe the black figure

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In contemporary art, the depiction and representation of Black figures have undergone profound transformations, evolving from stereotypical portrayals to complex, nuanced narratives that challenge historical narratives and societal perceptions. The phrase "the time is always now" underscores the urgency and immediacy of reimagining Black identities through creative expression. Artists today are not merely depicting Black figures; they are actively reframing how these figures are perceived, engaging with issues of race, identity, history, and resistance. This ongoing redefinition reflects a broader cultural shift towards acknowledgment, empowerment, and the reclamation of narratives historically marginalized or misrepresented. As such, the act of reframe is both a political statement and an artistic endeavor—one that insists on the relevance of Black stories in the present moment and pushes the boundaries of traditional representation.

The Historical Context of Black Representation in Art

Early Depictions and Stereotypes

Historically, Black figures in Western art were often depicted through stereotypical lenses—portrayed as caricatures, servants, or figures of inferiority. These representations served to reinforce racial hierarchies and justified oppressive social structures. Artists like Thomas Gainsborough and others in the 18th and 19th centuries often depicted Black individuals as exotic or subservient, reflecting colonial attitudes and racist ideologies.

The Legacy of Colonialism and Slavery

The legacy of colonialism and slavery deeply influenced artistic portrayals, embedding themes of objectification, dehumanization, and marginalization. Black figures were often absent from mainstream art or relegated to background roles, underscoring their societal invisibility. When present, their portrayals were filtered through the lens of domination rather than agency.

Resistance and Reappropriation

Despite these oppressive frameworks, some artists and communities used art as a form of resistance, reappropriating stereotypes and turning them into symbols of strength, resilience, and pride. This historical tension between marginalization and resistance set the stage for contemporary reframing efforts.

Contemporary Artists Reframing the Black Figure

Challenging Stereotypes and Narratives

Modern artists are consciously working to dismantle stereotypical depictions, replacing them with representations rooted in authenticity, complexity, and agency.

- **Kara Walker** uses silhouettes and provocative imagery to explore themes of race, gender, and history, revealing the violence embedded in racial narratives.
- **Kehinde Wiley** reimagines classical portraiture by placing Black subjects in regal poses, blending historical styles with contemporary identity.
- **Amahl Perry** creates vibrant, thought-provoking images that challenge viewers to confront racial stereotypes and histories.

Celebrating Black Culture and Identity

Many artists focus on celebrating Black culture, heritage, and identity, elevating Black figures beyond the stereotypes of the past.

1. **Faith Ringgold** combines storytelling with quilting, emphasizing cultural history and personal narratives.
2. **Jean-Michel Basquiat** merges graffiti art with jazz and African motifs, expressing Black identity through vibrant, raw imagery.
3. **Yinka Shonibare** employs textiles and colonial-era costumes to comment on post-colonial identity and history.

Using Art as a Form of Protest and Resistance

Art remains a powerful tool for activism, with Black artists using visual language to protest injustice and demand societal change.

- **Dread Scott** creates provocative works that confront racial violence and systemic injustice.
- **Hank Willis Thomas** explores themes of consumer culture, racial stereotypes, and social justice.
- **Theaster Gates** transforms spaces and narratives to empower marginalized communities.

The Techniques and Mediums of Reframing

Innovative Visual Strategies

Artists employ diverse techniques to reshape perceptions and narratives of Black figures.

- **Collage and Mixed Media:** Combining different materials to create layered, multifaceted representations (e.g., Mickalene Thomas).
- **Portraiture with a Contemporary Twist:** Using traditional portrait styles but infusing them with modern symbolism and themes (e.g., Kehinde Wiley).
- **Street Art and Graffiti:** Making Black figures accessible and visible in public spaces, often addressing social issues (e.g., Jean-Michel Basquiat).

Engaging with Digital and New Media

The digital realm offers new avenues for reframing, allowing for interactive and participatory art forms.

1. Augmented reality projects that tell Black stories in immersive environments.
2. Social media campaigns that amplify Black voices and narratives.
3. Virtual exhibitions that challenge traditional gallery spaces and reach wider audiences.

The Impact of Reframing on Society and Culture

Redefining Historical Narratives

Reframing Black figures helps to challenge and rewrite historical narratives, acknowledging contributions often erased or overlooked.

Empowering Black Communities

Artistic representations foster pride, identity, and empowerment within Black communities, providing role models and affirming cultural heritage.

Influencing Mainstream Culture

The shift in artistic portrayal influences fashion, media, and popular culture, promoting diversity and inclusion across sectors.

Encouraging Dialogue and Education

Reframed representations serve as educational tools, sparking conversations about race, history, and social justice.

Challenges and Future Directions

Overcoming Commercial and Cultural Barriers

Despite progress, artists face challenges such as commercialization, tokenism, and cultural appropriation.

Fostering Inclusive Narratives

Future efforts should aim for inclusive storytelling that encompasses diverse Black experiences and perspectives.

Supporting Emerging Artists

Investing in young, underrepresented artists is crucial for sustaining innovation and authenticity in reframing efforts.

Integrating Art into Societal Change

Embedding artistic practices into policy and community initiatives can amplify their impact and foster lasting change.

Conclusion: The Urgency of Now

The ongoing reframe of the Black figure in art underscores that "the time is always now." Artistic practices that challenge stereotypes, celebrate identity, and confront injustice are essential for fostering understanding, empathy, and societal transformation. By reimagining how Black figures are depicted, contemporary artists contribute to a cultural landscape where Black narratives are centered, complex, and valued—ultimately shaping a more

inclusive and truthful history. The power of art as a tool for resistance and renewal reminds us that the present moment is the most vital space for change, urging us to continue pushing boundaries and amplifying marginalized voices. As the dialogue around race and representation evolves, so too must the artistic expressions that reflect and shape our collective future.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the central message of 'The Time Is Always Now: Artists Reframe the Black Figure' exhibition?

The exhibition emphasizes the importance of viewing Black figures in art through a contemporary lens, highlighting ongoing narratives of identity, resilience, and redefining representation in the present moment.

How do participating artists challenge traditional portrayals of Black individuals?

Artists in the exhibition employ innovative techniques, storytelling, and symbolism to challenge stereotypical and historical depictions, offering more nuanced, diverse, and empowering representations of Black figures.

Why is the concept of 'the now' significant in reframing Black figures in art?

'The now' underscores the importance of current perspectives, social contexts, and ongoing conversations about race, ensuring that Black representation remains relevant, dynamic, and responsive to contemporary issues.

Can you give an example of an artwork from the exhibition that redefines the Black figure?

One example is a mixed-media piece that combines historical photographs with contemporary graffiti, blending past and present to highlight ongoing struggles and resilience of Black communities.

How does this exhibition contribute to ongoing conversations about racial justice?

By showcasing how artists reframe Black figures today, the exhibition fosters dialogue about representation, identity, and equality, encouraging viewers to reflect on racial narratives and advocate for social change.

What role do contemporary artists play in reshaping the legacy of Black figures in art?

Contemporary artists challenge outdated narratives, introduce new perspectives, and use their platforms to elevate Black voices, thus actively reshaping the artistic and cultural legacy surrounding Black figures.

How can viewers engage with the themes of 'The Time Is Always Now' in their own understanding of race and identity?

Viewers are encouraged to reflect on their perceptions, explore diverse narratives, and recognize the importance of ongoing dialogue and action in addressing racial issues, both within art and society at large.

Additional Resources

The Time Is Always Now: Artists Reframe the Black Figure

In the evolving landscape of contemporary art, the representation of Black figures has undergone a profound transformation. The phrase “the time is always now” resonates deeply within this context, emphasizing the urgency and continual relevance of reinterpreting Black identities through artistic expression. Artists across generations are actively engaging in reframing the Black figure—not merely as subjects of historical or stereotypical narratives but as complex, dynamic agents of their own stories. This ongoing shift challenges longstanding visual tropes, confronts systemic misrepresentations, and invites viewers to reconsider perceptions rooted in centuries of marginalization.

Historical Context: The Evolution of Black Representation in Art

To understand the significance of contemporary efforts to reframe the Black figure, it's essential to examine the historical backdrop. Traditionally, depictions of Black individuals in Western art have often been constrained by stereotypes, caricatures, and dehumanizing tropes.

Key points in this historical trajectory include:

- Enslavement and Commodification: During the transatlantic slave trade, Black bodies were commodified and depicted as property, often in artworks that justified or celebrated slavery.
- Exoticism and Othering: In the 19th century, Orientalist and colonialist artworks frequently portrayed Black figures as exotic, primitive, or subhuman, reinforcing racial hierarchies.
- Stereotypical Tropes: Images of Black servants, minstrel characters, or caricatures persisted well into modern art, shaping societal perceptions and stereotypes.
- Lack of Agency: For centuries, Black figures in art were often passive, backgrounded, or symbolic rather than portrayed as active agents with their own narratives.

This historical context underscores the importance of the present-day movement to reframe Black figures—moving beyond stereotypes to showcase agency, complexity, and multiplicity.

Contemporary Artistic Reframing: Challenging Stereotypes and Expanding Narratives

Modern artists are actively engaging in redefining what Black representation

means in art. Their work reflects a conscious effort to challenge stereotypes, confront racial biases, and explore the richness of Black identities.

Breaking Free from Stereotypical Tropes

Contemporary artists are deconstructing and transforming traditional images:

- Portraying Black individuals as multifaceted: From everyday moments to abstract concepts, art now captures the depth of Black experiences.
- Rejecting caricatures: Instead of caricatures or symbolic tokens, artists depict Black figures with nuance and dignity.
- Utilizing diverse mediums and styles: Painting, sculpture, digital art, performance, and installation allow for varied explorations of Black identity.

Amplifying Black Voices

Many artists emphasize the importance of centering Black voices:

- Autobiographical works: Artists like Kara Walker and Mickalene Thomas incorporate personal history and cultural references.
- Community engagement: Public art projects and murals celebrate Black culture and history, fostering dialogue and empowerment.

Reclaiming Space and Narrative

Artists are reclaiming space both physically and symbolically:

- Public murals and street art: Transforming urban landscapes to highlight Black figures and stories.
- Historical reinterpretations: Revisiting and reimagining historical figures or moments from a Black perspective.

Key Artists and Movements Leading the Reframing

Several contemporary artists and movements exemplify the ongoing effort to reframe the Black figure in art.

Kehinde Wiley: Reimagining Power and Royalty

Kehinde Wiley is renowned for his vibrant portraits of Black individuals posed within classical European art traditions. His work challenges stereotypes by placing Black figures in positions of power, royalty, and dignity. Wiley's portraits, such as those of Barack Obama and other notable figures, elevate Black subjects to the center of historical and aesthetic narratives.

Mickalene Thomas: Celebrating Black Beauty and Identity

Mickalene Thomas's mixed-media collages and paintings explore themes of beauty, sexuality, and identity within Black culture. Her intricate use of rhinestones, patterns, and photography redefines notions of femininity and Black female empowerment.

The Black Arts Movement and Its Legacy

Emerging in the 1960s and 1970s, the Black Arts Movement sought to articulate Black cultural pride and political activism through art. Contemporary artists continue this legacy, emphasizing social justice, heritage, and resistance.

The Role of Intersectionality in Artistic Reframing

Modern art increasingly incorporates intersectionality—the understanding of how various social identities such as race, gender, class, and sexuality intersect to shape individual experiences.

Implications for Black figure representation include:

- Highlighting diverse experiences: Addressing issues faced by Black women, LGBTQ+ individuals, disabled persons, and others within the Black community.
- Complex narratives: Moving beyond monolithic portrayals to showcase multiplicity and fluidity of identity.
- Activism and advocacy: Using art as a tool to challenge systemic inequalities and amplify marginalized voices.

Themes and Techniques in Contemporary Reframing

Artists employ various themes and techniques to reframe the Black figure:

- Historical revisionism: Reinterpreting historical images or creating alternative narratives that challenge dominant histories.
- Abstract and conceptual work: Using abstraction to evoke emotion or symbolize Black experiences.
- Symbolism and myth: Incorporating mythological or spiritual symbols to connect Black identities to broader cultural histories.
- Digital and new media: Utilizing technology to reach wider audiences and experiment with interactive or immersive experiences.

Impact and Reception: Changing Perceptions and Conversations

The efforts of contemporary artists are not only reshaping visual culture but also influencing societal perceptions.

Key impacts include:

- Educational influence: Art exhibitions and public programs educate audiences about Black history and contemporary issues.
- Cultural normalization: Frequent, diverse representations help normalize Black identities in mainstream media and art spaces.
- Activist engagement: Art becomes a form of activism, inspiring social change and fostering empathy.

Reception challenges:

- Resistance from traditional institutions hesitant to embrace new narratives.
- Commercialization risks diluting the messages of authenticity and resistance.
- Ongoing debates about cultural appropriation versus cultural appreciation.

The Future of Black Figure Representation in Art

Looking ahead, the trajectory of reframing the Black figure in art suggests continued innovation and activism. Emerging trends include:

- Virtual reality and augmented reality: Creating immersive experiences to explore Black histories and identities.
- Decentralized platforms: Using social media and independent galleries to showcase diverse Black artists beyond traditional institutions.
- Collaborative projects: Engaging communities directly in the creative process to ensure authentic representation.

Why "The Time Is Always Now"

The phrase encapsulates the urgency of this artistic movement. Reframing the Black figure is not a temporary trend but an ongoing imperative—an acknowledgment that representation, justice, and recognition must happen continuously. The present moment demands active engagement with history, culture, and systemic change. Artists remind us that change is possible when we recognize that "the time is always now," asserting that Black stories, identities, and contributions are vital to the fabric of contemporary society.

Conclusion

Artists are at the forefront of a vital cultural shift—reframing the Black figure to reflect authenticity, complexity, and empowerment. From historical misrepresentations to contemporary expressions of identity, their work challenges us to see beyond stereotypes and embrace a more nuanced understanding. As the world navigates conversations about race, identity, and justice, art remains a powerful tool to shape perceptions, foster empathy, and advocate for change. In this ongoing dialogue, the message is clear: the time to reframe, recognize, and celebrate Black figures is always now.

[The Time Is Always Now Artists Reframe The Black Figure](#)

the time is always now artists reframe the black figure: The Time is Always Now Ekow Eshun, Bernardine Evaristo, 2024-02-15

the time is always now artists reframe the black figure: Reframing the Black Figure, 2024-02-15 'What happens when Black artists depict Black figures? What art does this produce, and what worlds of possibility does this reveal?' - Ekow Eshun Reframing the Black Figure showcases more than 20 of the most important Black figurative artists working in the UK and US today. This visual giftbook introduces readers to the field of Black figuration by highlighting a selection of key works from the National Portrait Gallery exhibition, The Time is Always Now: Artists Reframe the Black Figure. Readers will encounter contemporary Black artists producing beautiful, urgent artworks that presents the Black form with nuance and depth. Richly illustrated with artworks and visual details, alongside short biographies for all featured artists, this accessible publication offers an opportunity for readers to experience some of the most exciting artworks depicting the Black form. Within this context, they take on a dual role, as the accomplished work of individual artists on the one hand, and as a collective assertion of Black presence on the other. Featured artists include Hurvin Anderson, Michael Armitage, Jordan Casteel, Njideka Akunyili Crosby, Noah Davis, Godfried

Donkor, Kimathi Donkor, Denzil Forrester, Lubaina Himid, Claudette Johnson, Titus Kaphar, Kerry James Marshall, Toyin Ojih Odutola, Chris Ofili, Jennifer Packer, Thomas J. Price, Nathaniel Mary Quinn, Lorna Simpson, Amy Sherald, Henry Taylor and Barbara Walker.

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the time is always now artists reframe the black figure: Textile Design Theory in the Making Elaine Igoe, 2021-07-15 Textile design inhabits a liminal space spanning art, design and craft. This book explores how textile design bridges the decorative and the functional, and takes us from handcrafting to industrial manufacture. In doing so, it distinguishes textiles as a distinctive design discipline, against the backdrop of today's emerging design issues. With commentaries from a range of international design scholars, the book demonstrates how design theory is now being employed in diverse scenarios to encourage innovation beyond the field of design itself. Positioning textiles within contemporary design research, *Textile Design Theory in the Making* reveals how the theory and practice of textile design exist in a synergistic, creative relationship. Drawing on qualitative research methods, including auto-ethnography and feminist critique, the book provides a theoretical underpinning for textile designers working in interdisciplinary scenarios, uniting theory and texts from the fields of anthropology, philosophy, literature and material design.

the time is always now artists reframe the black figure: *Beckett's afterlives* Jonathan Bignell, Pim Verhulst, Anna McMullan, 2023-02-21 Despite the steady rise in adaptations of Samuel

Beckett's work across the world following the author's death in 1989, Beckett's afterlives is the first book-length study dedicated to this creative phenomenon. The collection employs interrelated concepts of adaptation, remediation and appropriation to reflect on Beckett's own evolving approach to crossing genre boundaries and to analyse the ways in which contemporary artists across different media and diverse cultural contexts – including the UK, Europe, the USA and Latin America – continue to engage with Beckett. The book offers fresh insights into how his work has kept inspiring both practitioners and audiences in the twenty-first century, operating through methodologies and approaches that aim to facilitate and establish the study of modern-day adaptations, not just of Beckett but other (multimedia) authors as well.

the time is always now artists reframe the black figure: Cutting a Figure Richard J. Powell, 2008 Examining portraits of black people over the past two centuries, *Cutting a Figure* argues that these images should be viewed as a distinct category of portraiture that differs significantly from depictions of people with other racial and ethnic backgrounds. The difference, Richard Powell contends, lies in the social capital that stems directly from the black subject's power to subvert dominant racist representations by evincing such traits as self-composure, self-adornment, and self-imagining. Powell forcefully supports this argument with evidence drawn from a survey of nineteenth-century portraits, in-depth case studies of the postwar fashion model Donyale Luna and the contemporary portraitist Barkley L. Hendricks, and insightful analyses of images created since the late 1970s. Along the way, he discusses major artists—such as Frédéric Bazille, John Singer Sargent, James Van Der Zee, and David Hammons—alongside such overlooked producers of black visual culture as the Tonka and Nike corporations. Combining previously unpublished images with scrupulous archival research, *Cutting a Figure* illuminates the ideological nature of the genre and the centrality of race and cultural identity in understanding modern and contemporary portraiture.

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the time is always now artists reframe the black figure: Violence, Visual Culture, and the Black Male Body Cassandra Jackson, 2011-04-13 From early photographs of disfigured slaves to contemporary representations of bullet-riddled rappers, images of wounded black men have long permeated American culture. While scholars have fittingly focused on the ever-present figure of the

hypermasculine black male, little consideration has been paid to the wounded black man as a persistent cultural figure. This book considers images of wounded black men on various stages, including early photography, contemporary art, hip hop, and new media. Focusing primarily on photographic images, Jackson explores the wound as a specular moment that mediates power relations between seers and the seen. Historically, the representation of wounded black men has privileged the viewer in service of white supremacist thought. At the same time, contemporary artists have deployed the figure to expose and disrupt this very power paradigm. Jackson suggests that the relationship between the viewer and the viewed is not so much static as fluid, and that wounds serve as intricate negotiations of power structures that cannot always be simplified into the condensed narratives of victims and victimizers. Overall, Jackson attempts to address both the ways in which the wound has been exploited to patrol and contain black masculinity, as well as the ways in which twentieth century artists have represented the wound to disrupt its oppressive implications

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the time is always now artists reframe the black figure: Colored People Time Meg Onli, 2020-09-22 Artworks, essays and poetry explore the racial implications of capitalist temporalities In 2019, the Institute of Contemporary Art at the University of Pennsylvania presented the experimental exhibition *Colored People Time*. Divided into three chapters--Mundane Futures, Quotidian Pasts, Banal Presents--it used the Black vernacular phrase *Colored People's Time* (CPT) to explore the ways that dominant notions of time have been used to control and condemn Black people. CPT names a political performance by Black people to evade and ridicule the enforcement of punctuality and productivity. Alongside reproductions of historical objects from the Black Panther Party, Sutton E. Griggs, the National Institutes of Health/Getty Images, and the African Collection at the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, *Colored People Time* includes reprints of seminal essays, newly commissioned writing and poetry from Huey Copeland, Eve Ewing, Michael Hanchard, Matthew Angelo Harrison, Amber Rose Johnson, Carolyn Lazard, Jessica Lynne, Tausif Noor, Meg Onli, Gregory Pardlo, M. NourbeSe Philip, Monique Scott, Martine Syms and Michelle M. Wright. Artists include: Aria Dean, Kevin Jerome Everson, Matthew Angelo Harrison, Carolyn Lazard, Dave McKenzie, Cameron Rowland, Sable Elyse Smith and Martine Syms.

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explores both the obvious and obscure: from ruminations on the fraught representation of Black bodies, to reflections on the creative processes of women artists, to analysis of the use of blood in visual art. bell hooks has been “instrumental in cracking open the white, western canon for Black artists” (Artnet), with searing essays complemented by conversations with Carrie Mae Weems, Emma Amos, Margo Humphrey, and LaVerne Wells-Bowie. Featuring full-color artwork from giants such as Jean-Michel Basquiat, Lorna Simpson, and Alison Saar, *Art on My Mind* “examines the way race, sex and class shape who makes art, how it sells and who values it” (The New York Times), while questioning how art can be instrumental for Black liberation. In doing so, hooks urges us to unravel the forces of oppression that colonize our imaginations. With a new foreword from acclaimed contemporary artist Mickalene Thomas, this thirtieth-anniversary edition passes the torch to a new generation of artists, capturing hooks’s simple yet evergreen affirmation: art matters—it is a life force in the struggle for freedom. *Art on My Mind* is essential reading for anyone looking to find lessons on liberation and creativity in the world of color—the free world of art.

the time is always now artists reframe the black figure: *The Artist Portrait Series*, 2001
Fern Logan's collection of photographic portraits documents the emergence of the African American artist into mainstream American art. The Artist Portrait Series captures sixty significant artists from the late twentieth century. Each rich duotone portrait is accompanied by Logan's commentary on the artist. Logan began her career as a nature, landscape, and architectural photographer, but in 1983, resolving to put the human figure into her repertoire, she created the photodocumentary Artist Portrait Series. Her philosophy of art as an educational tool prompted her to document the accomplishments of such highly skilled visual artists as Gordon Parks, Elizabeth Catlett, Jacob Lawrence, Roy DeCarava, and Romare Bearden. Logan expanded the project to promote recognition for prominent black artists in theater, television, film, music, dance, and literature, including Alvin Ailey, Maya Angelou, and Adolph Caesar. Her subjects include well-known artists as well as those who were emerging at the time they were photographed. For Logan, the artistic process is as important as the final image. Her portraits not only capture the personality of the sitter but also convey the dialogue and rapport between photographer and subject. Logan's interest in the tonal range of the black-and-white photograph and its contribution to the rich drama between light and dark informs her photographs in a formal manner. By allowing the artist/sitter to construct the photographic moment, Logan creates visually dynamic and psychologically probing images that are reinforced by the immediate studio or living environment. This elegant book documents nearly two decades of her finest portraits.

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the time is always now artists reframe the black figure: **A History of African-American Artists** Romare Bearden, Harry Brinton Henderson, 1993 A landmark work of art history: lavishly illustrated and extraordinary for its thoroughness, *A History of African-American Artists* -- conceived, researched, and written by the great American artist Romare Bearden with journalist Harry Henderson, who completed the work after Bearden's death in 1988 -- gives a conspectus of African-American art from the late eighteenth century to the present. It examines the lives and careers of more than fifty signal African-American artists, and the relation of their work to prevailing artistic, social, and political trends both in America and throughout the world. Beginning with a radical reevaluation of the enigma of Joshua Johnston, a late eighteenth-century portrait painter widely assumed by historians to be one of the earliest known African-American artists, Bearden and Henderson go on to examine the careers of Robert S. Duncanson, Edward M. Bannister, Henry Ossawa Tanner, Aaron Douglas, Edmonia Lewis, Jacob Lawrence, Hale A. Woodruff, Augusta Savage, Charles H. Alston, Ellis Wilson, Archibald J. Motley, Jr., Horace Pippin, Alma W. Thomas, and many others. Illustrated with more than 420 black-and-white illustrations and 61 color reproductions -- including rediscovered classics, works no longer extant, and art never before seen in this country -- *A History of African-American Artists* is a stunning achievement.

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