EDUCATOR GUIDE

Art and Race Matters:
The Career of Robert Colescott
September 20, 2019 - January 12, 2020

CAC
Contemporary Arts Center
Welcome!

Dear Educators,

We are delighted to have you join us at the Contemporary Arts Center (CAC) for the Robert Colescott Retrospective, on view from September 20 – January 19, 2019. This exhibition features work spanning Colescott’s career, including never before exhibited paintings from his early years. Challenging us to consider our own place within the historical and racial context, Colescott inserts himself as a biographical element into the conversation. Many of the works use characters, such as Aunt Jemima, that encourage a reexamination of historical personas, while leaving space to discuss and compare current trends against historical stereotypes.

Many of the works are for a mature audience—there are themes around race and sexuality, as well as nudity and profanity. One section lacks sexual and ideological themes and language (there are abstracted nudes) in order to engage high school visitors with conversations around race, identity and artistic growth. The content of this guide can be used as a framework to prepare you and your students to visit, view some or all of the exhibition, or just use Colescott in classroom discussion and projects. Lesson and discussion suggestions are included, which introduce and explore some of the key themes and ideas of the exhibition.

We invite you to explore, create, immerse yourselves, and discover what stories, connections and lessons can be found within these works. While some of the works are too mature for some audiences, others can provide valuable springboards to important conversations.

Enjoy your visit!
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ABOUT THE ARTIST

Robert Colescott
- Born in Oakland, California in 1925
- Died in 2009 at the age of 83 in Tucson, Arizona
- Drafted into the U.S. Army in 1942. Served in Europe until end of WWII.
- Education: UC Berkeley.
  - BA - drawing and painting, 1949.
  - MA - drawing and painting, 1952.
  - Studied with French painter Fernand Léger.
- Extensive teaching experience:
  - 1957-66 - Portland State University, 1957-66
  - 1966-67 - American University of Cairo - Visiting professor
  - 1970-85 - Cal State Stanislaus; UC Berkeley; San Francisco Art Institute
  - 1983 - University of Arizona, Tucson - Visiting professor
  - 1985 - University of Arizona, Tucson - Joined faculty
  - 1990 - First art department faculty member to receive the title of Regents’ Professor
- Select Awards
  - Honorary Doctorate of Fine Arts from the Maryland Institute College of Art (1997) and San Francisco Art Institute (1994)
  - First African American artist to represent the United States in the Venice Biennale in a solo show (1997)

ABOUT COLESCLOTT’S WORK

- Colescott’s travels to Egypt in the 1960s proved to be life changing. Began to understand his “Blackness.”
- In 1970 Colescott began to create works based on iconic paintings from art history.
- He often incorporated self-portraits (some more abstracted than others) into the pieces.
- Colescott’s work investigates double consciousness. W.E.B. DuBois introduced this concept: “looking at one’s self through the eyes of others.”
- He subverted modern day standards around liberty, race and body standards by intertwining content, style and subject matter.
- In his Homage to Delacroix, Colescott “black-faced” some of the figures to push the standards of “fine art” taste, to exploit racism, and to question liberty and the heroic.
• Colescott's work is in many public collections including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Whitney Museum of American Art and the Museum of Modern Art in New York; the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and Los Angeles' Museum of Contemporary Art.
• Influenced by West Coast artists Richard Diebenkorn, David Parker, and Elmer Bischoff
• Inspired artists of color such as: Sanford Biggers, Kerry James Marshall, Kara Walker, Ellen Gallagher, Elio Rodriguez, Mickalene Thomas, Xavier Simmon, as well as non-black Artists

QUOTES

“I am not a writer. I present an image that can leave it to you to write the story.”

- Robert Colescott

“The way that one serves is to serve art first… The way you serve art is by being true to yourself.”

- Robert Colescott

“Unless you are gushingly positive or make them heroic, images of black people in paintings may be suspect. But I’m very proud of the fact that more people get what I’m after than I expect. Oddly enough, more white people than black people accuse me of being a racist.”

- Robert Colescott

“Appropriation, as I cast it, is more about taking over a painting and putting it to a very different use or giving it a very different meaning than the original artist has done. It may even be contrary to the thread of meaning in that original work. In a sense, I would steal the painting—the idea and the look of it—and put it to my own use.”

- Robert Colescott

ABOUT THIS EXHIBITION

The Contemporary Arts Center is proud to open our 2019 - 2020 exhibition season with Art and Race Matters, the first comprehensive retrospective of one of America’s most compelling and controversial artists, Robert Colescott (1925-2009). The exhibition will reveal 85 total works throughout 53 years of his career that both bring to the surface and challenge diversity and racial stereotypes. Art and Race Matters is organized by Lowery Stokes Sims, a long-time Colescott scholar, and CAC’s Alice Weston & Harris Director, Raphaela Platow, with assistance from Matthew Weseley. The exhibition will be
accompanied by a catalogue highlighting Colescott’s extensive career published by Rizzoli Electa and will be touring several museums around the United States all facilitated by the CAC.

“Given the crises of race relations, political propaganda and image manipulation in the current American landscape, Colescott’s career has never been more relevant,” says Curator Lowery Stokes Sims. “His perspectives on race, life, social mores, historical heritage and cultural hybridity allow us to forthrightly confront what the state of global culture will be in the immediate future.” Colescott’s approach to his paintings—in what seems like an offhand, sarcastic, satirical and even caustic manner—allows us to confront what the state of global culture will be in the next decade.

The CAC was awarded a Sotheby’s Prize for Art and Race Matters in winter of 2018 for curatorial excellence and putting together an exhibition that will break new ground and challenge our understanding of art today. The exhibition will approach Colescott’s work both in terms of chronology and the themes and subjects he dealt with over the course of his career. It will explore his oeuvre through issues such as the American Dream and assimilation aspirations, mass media imagery, notions of beauty, sexual and gender transgressions to name a few.

“Robert Colescott is an artist I have been interested in for a long time as a painter and astute purveyor of American society,” says CAC Alice & Harris Weston Director, Raphaela Platow. “I feel strongly that Colescott’s exploration of race, identity and politics in the US are as pertinent as ever. This major survey outlining Colescott’s overall contribution is a timely undertaking that will also reevaluate the artists place within the art discourse.”

**VOCABULARY / KEY WORDS**

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THEMES

Biographical Narrative - rather than create strictly biographical work, Colescott placed himself within the image, becoming a part of the experience. His story is told alongside larger narratives. He demonstrates his interest in art history by copying well known artists. After returning from Egypt, Colescott discussed his race and began to explore racial themes in his work. He admits his “bad habits” by including himself alongside models in sexual situations.

Appropriation - Colescott’s use of art historical and pop culture imagery to tell a narrative around the lack of black history in art history, as well as comment on the various ways images can be interpreted. With hidden meanings, symbolisms and exaggerated irony, Robert Colescott is telling a story that goes beyond the literal.

American Dream / Social Justice - Through his work Colescott addressed the current political climate of his time by calling out the double standards and hypocrisy that existed for communities of color—specifically referencing the American Dream.

Identity - As a black male, Colescott placed himself into satirized Eurocentric paintings to rewrite the narrative and bring forth the irony of historical events.

Beauty/Female Objectification - Colescott both objectifies (and sexualizes) the women in his imagery, while also acknowledging the problems with ideal beauty. The women in Colescott’s work featured many different races, and, over time, challenges the idea that beauty is only “white, blond women.” However, in a feminist lens, the women in his compositions are often reduced to a sexual object, regardless of race.

PRE-VISIT DISCUSSIONS

ABOUT THE CONTEMPORARY ARTS CENTER

In 1939, Betty Pollak Rauh, Peggy Frank Crawford and Rita Rentschler Cushman took the advice of Edward M.M. Warburg, the founding father of the American Ballet and a founder of the Museum of Modern Art. He suggested that rather than stress about finding non-existent art jobs in New York, “Why not starting something in Cincinnati? Plenty of room there. If you decide to try, come and see me and I’ll help you.” By August of that year, Peggy Frank Crawford, Betty Pollack and Rita Rentschler raised $5000 (about$93,000 today) and created the Modern Art Society (MAS). For almost a year their “office” consisted of a letter file and a portable typewriter set up in one or another living room. Within a few years, the MAS had exhibited Renoir, Van Gogh, Gauguin, Picasso, Beckman, Klee and many more in the lower levels of the Cincinnati Art
Museum. In 1952, the MAS changed their name to the Contemporary Arts Center and in 1964 they earned a space of their own in downtown Cincinnati. In 2003, the CAC moved into the Lois & Richard Rosenthal Center for Contemporary Art designed by architect Zaha Hadid. The NY Times called the structure, “the best new building since the Cold War.”

The Contemporary Arts Center is a non-collecting institution, meaning there is no permanent collection. All exhibitions are borrowed from artists, collectors and other art galleries and institutions. We strive to create exhibitions that allow visitors to “open their minds” to the arts, and to the dialogue that can be had when viewing contemporary art. We believe that art and the creative process belong to all people and that contemporary artists are an important part of how we see and interact with our world today.

ABOUT THE LOIS & RICHARD ROSENTHAL CENTER FOR CONTEMPORARY ARTS

In the late 1990s, after acquiring the lot on which the Contemporary Arts Center now sits, a committee narrowed a field of over 300 architects chose to design the building—first to 97, then to 12 and finally 3 of the most exciting designers working in the world today. From them, a unanimous choice emerged: Baghdad-born, London-trained Zaha Hadid.

The decision was in keeping with the CAC’s 60-year history of promoting the new. Though Hadid had been the subject of adulation, study and controversy, her work exhibited at major museums with international critical acclaim, she had only completed two freestanding structures during her career. As a largely untested inventor, a woman and an Arabic Muslim, Hadid had not found the construction world easy to enter. This renowned building is Hadid’s first American building, and is the first American museum building designed by a woman. Groundbreaking took place in May 2001 and the new Center opened to rave reviews on May 31, 2003. The seven-story, 82,265 square-foot Contemporary Arts Center is named the Lois & Richard Rosenthal Center for Contemporary Art after the CAC’s former Chairman of the Board and the most generous contributor to the new building. It sits on a narrow 11,000-square-foot footprint, and includes a 2,366-square-foot black box performance space.

Born in Iraq in 1950, Hadid received her degree in mathematics from the American University in Beirut and studied at the Architectural Association in London where she won the Diploma Prize in 1977. Upon graduation, Hadid became a partner at the Office of Metropolitan Architecture where she worked with influential architects Rem Koolhaas and Elia Zenghelis. Establishing her own practice in London in 1979, she soon gained international attention with her groundbreaking plan for the Peak International Design Competition for Hong Kong in 1983. In 2004, she became the first female recipient of the Pritzker Architecture Prize, which is the equivalent to the Nobel Prize for Architecture.
In 2008, she was listed as one of Forbes Magazine’s “100 Most Powerful Women,” and in 2010, Time Magazine named her one of the “100 Most Influential People in the World,” and UNESCO Artist for Peace. She was awarded the Stirling Prize for Architecture in 2010 and 2011. In 2012, Hadid was awarded Damehood by Queen Elizabeth II. And, in 2015, she received the Royal Gold Medal from the Royal Institute of British Architects Hadid died in 2016.

RULES AND GUIDELINES

- Visitor admission and school tours are free at the Contemporary Arts Center.
- We require that must be a chaperone for every 5 students under the age of 18 for self-guided groups. For docent-led tours, the required ratio is 1 to 10 for students through grade 5 and 1 to 15 for students grades 6-12.
- No backpacks, coats or lunches are permitted in the galleries, but personal belongings may be stored in the large bins or lockers we have available. Instructors may keep any emergency bags and purses with them.
- Currently photography is permitted in all areas of the museum. The CAC encourages you to post photos to various social media sites using @CincyCAC and #CincyCAC.
- Pens are not permitted in the gallery spaces. Pencils are available for use at the front desk.
- Walk throughout all galleries– no running, climbing, or roughhousing. If visiting with students under 18 please provide guidance and supervision.

ACCESSIBILITY INFORMATION

- Our facility is ADA compliant and we will make every effort to provide accommodations when requested.
- Hearing protection is available upon request.
- Fidgets are available upon request.
- Sensory maps and social stories are available upon request.
- Large text and braille text are available upon request.
- Two quiet spaces are available—the Lower Level Lobby and the Contemplation Room.
- Art and Race Matters has an audio described tour and an ASL video tour available.
- For further inquiries or requests, please contact Shawnee Turner at sturner@cincycac.org
ARTWORK DISCUSSIONS

These discussions can occur prior to or after a visit, but also in lieu of a visit.

Discussion I

Consider this quote from Colescott:

“ I am not a writer. I present an image that can leave it to you to write the story. “

Left: Robert Colescott, Eat Dem Taters, 1975
Right: Vincent van Gogh, The Potato Eaters, 1885

- How does art tell a story?
- How do both paintings comment on their subjects? How do they give us information?
- How can the viewer insert their own experience into the image?
- Does the viewer’s experience change the meaning of the painting?
- What do you think Colescott was trying to say by appropriating van Gogh’s The Potato Eaters?
- What is a stereotype? How do both artists use stereotypes? How are these stereotypes different because of time and culture?
Discussion II

Colescott’s work is problematic to the conversation of beauty and standards of beauty. On the one hand, he objectifies women in the works, highlighting their sexuality and making them available for the viewer. On the other, he makes commentary about the destructive nature of voyeurism and objectification. There is also another thread of conversation—that of diverse beauty. Colescott seems to advocate for the acceptance of all types of beauty in his paintings.

Consider these quotes from Colescott:

Once asked why he painted “ugly, fat and lumpy” women, the artist responded: “There are other societies in which ‘fat’ is considered beautiful. At different times we, the human race, have had different images of women and men. In Paleolithic times the female archetype was made up mostly of genitals, buttocks, and breasts - it was an ideal that had a lot to do with fertility and reproduction.”

“I thought a lot about Cezanne’s bathers and Matisse’s bathers, and thought I would do some bathers. They’re about competing standards of beauty, and also about the intrusion of the white world on a black world. It also poses the idea of a beauty parade.”

Big Bathers, Another Judgement, 1986
- How does Colescott’s art reflect current trends and social norms in regard to body imagery? How don’t they?
- Do you think Robert Colescott effectively portrayed positive beauty ideals in his work? Why or why not?
- How does Colescott challenge beauty standards surrounding race?
- Consider the following body positive memes (and others): How are Colescott’s images different from/the same as these memes? What are the contributing factors to the ideological shifts around body image?
Discussion III

In 1949, after finishing his studies at UC Berkeley, Robert Colescott moved to Paris to receive advanced training at Fernand Léger’s atelier. Robert Colescott found the influence of the French artist to be invaluable. “He directed me. He didn’t think that abstract work had enough meaning and enough significance for his people. And so he encouraged me to go back to the figure and give up abstraction as such.”

Fernand Léger was a French painter, sculptor and filmmaker. His early work was influenced by Impressionism, yet much of his later style came from the influences of Picasso, Braque and Cézanne. After serving in the military, like Colescott, Léger’s work transitioned from abstracts to figures and objects that were characterized by tubular, machine-like forms. Following Léger’s lead, which emphasized scale, color and narration, Colescott eschewed his previous abstract style and began working with models and props. Looking at Colescott’s early work one can see the influence that Léger had on the budding artist. Léger remained a role model to Colescott for the remainder of his career.

- After looking at examples of their work, how was Colescott impacted by Léger?
- Even after Colescott’s style moved away from mimicking Léger, what lessons do you think stayed with Colescott?
- How have you been impacted by teachers/mentors?
- Why is it important to study other artists? How can studying other artists help someone find their own voice?
The historical icon Aunt Jemima appears in several of Colescott’s artworks. The inspiration for Aunt Jemima came from the minstrel song “Old Aunt Jemima.” Although written by a black performer named Billy Kersands in 1875, it was performed by white men in blackface. The image of Aunt Jemima was based on female house slaves and depicted in popular media as middle-aged, overweight, dark-skinned, and asexual. The reality of house slaves was very different. They were often younger, attractive, and light-skinned—typically the child of a slave and the male slave owner, and a victim of sexual assault. Colescott portrays Aunt Jemima in the manner of popular media; however, he imbues her with sexuality, both twisting the reality and challenging 20th century conventions of beauty.

Colescott is not the only artist to re-appropriate the imagery of Aunt Jemima. One of the most well-known pieces to empower this historical icon is *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima* by Betye Saar. In the found object assemblage, Saar shifts the derogatory narrative by empowering and liberating the figure with a new identity.

“It was 1972, four years after the death of Martin Luther King, Jr. ‘When I heard of the assassination, I was so angry and had to do something,’ Saar explains from her studio in Los Angeles. But it wasn’t until she received the prompt from Rainbow Sign that she used her art to voice outrage at the repression of the black community in America. ‘I found the mammy figurine with an apron notepad and put a rifle in her hand, she says.’

“What saved it was that I made Aunt Jemima into a revolutionary figure,” she wrote. “I was recycling the imagery, in a way, from negative to positive.”

https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-betye-saar-transformed-aunt-jemima-symbol-black-power
Carrie Ann Weems, a former friend of artist Robert Colescott, had her own interpretation of the Aunt Jemima figure, as shown in her piece *Aunt Jemima Diptych*. Weems work delves into the stereotypes of black families, racial stereotypes and the history of slavery. Her diptych of Aunt Jemima is a reminder of “how casually hate-based culture seeps into our homes and consciousnesses.” Like Colescott, Weems has a way of creating juxtapositions between reality and satire, in addition to appropriating historical images while placing herself within the frame of her photographs.

Faith Ringgold’s first storytelling quilt, *Who’s Afraid of Aunt Jemima*, is rich with imagery and color and tells the story of a successful Black woman. Using the quilt to express her discontent at the lack of positive black images in art, Ringgold tells the story from an African American perspective. In the narrative, Ringgold asks the question: “what are we, as black women, supposed to do with our lives and how are we supposed to do it?” In *Who’s Afraid of Aunt Jemima*, the artist has taken the protagonist and transformed her from a disenfranchised “mammy” to an entrepreneur and happy matriarch of a blossoming, diverse family.
Faith Ringgold
*Who’s Afraid of Aunt Jemima?*
1983

[https://youtu.be/K1AXCF2h3cQ](https://youtu.be/K1AXCF2h3cQ)

Like Colescott, Ringgold believed that the "mammy" had been stripped of her sexual identity because she was shown as dark-skinned, middle-aged, and overweight. She wanted to rewrite a history of Aunt Jemima that made her wholly woman and independent.

Kara Walker
*A Subtlety*
2014

Kara Walker’s 35-foot sculpture of the composite sphinx and Aunt Jemima. The sculpture is made of four tons of white sugar and housed in the Domino warehouse. Walker takes a character who represented a silent, powerless figure and develops a robust representation of the stamina and perseverance of an African woman. Walker chose to create this sculpture in the confines of the former Domino sugar factory in Brooklyn—sugar once being one of the largest slave labor crops. “A powerful personification of the most beleaguered demographic in this country - he black woman - shows us where we all come from, innocent and unrefined” (NY Times).

- What is the benefit of appropriating a well-known image like Aunt Jemima?
  What’s the danger?
- Do you think these artists were successful in their attempt to transform?
LESSON PLAN IDEAS

1. After engaging in Discussion I on stereotypes, have students write down the first phrases/ideas that come to mind for the following words: cheerleader, construction worker, grandmother, doctor, teacher, librarian, gang member, athlete, honor roll student, nurse, dancer. Tell them to not censor themselves. Have the students choose two to focus on as a group. Then separate the students into two groups, assign each of them one of the roles. Have the students create, as a group, a list of descriptors for the role they are assigned. As an alternative, students can work individually and create collages/drawings of the roles. Give them a definition of the word stereotype (A stereotype is an oversimplified generalization about a person or group of people without regard for individual differences. Even seemingly positive stereotypes that link a person or group to a specific positive trait can have negative consequences.). Have a discussion around how their observations fit into the idea of stereotypes.

2. After engaging in Discussion II on ideals of beauty, have students research standards of beauty from different cultures and time periods. Allow them to self-select based on personal interest. After the students present what they’ve learned, engage the students in an art project that hypothesizes what beauty will look like in the future in American society.

3. After engaging in Discussion III on the importance of influence, have students write about what art/writing influences they have. They should reflect on how this influence has impacted them. Then, have the students research an artist/writer, etc. who perhaps has similar themes as they do, but works in a different style (or vice versa). Discuss how that experience impacts their work.

4. After engaging in Discussion IV on the use of appropriation, have students do a quick write about a cause/aspect of identity they care about. Have students do research on an image/logo that is connected to that cause/aspect of identity. Then, appropriating that image/logo, have the students create artwork that speaks to their beliefs around that cause/aspect of identity. Have students discuss their works, and whether their messaging comes through in the finished work.
The career of the American painter Robert Colescott (1925-2009) has never been more relevant than at this present moment in time. Given the crisis of race relations, image management and political manipulation in the current American landscape, his perspectives on race, life, social mores, historical heritage and cultural hybridity forthrightly confront the state of global culture today.

Colescott initially made his mark on the art scene in the 1970s with paintings that transformed well-known masterpieces of art history by black facing the main characters. This provocative strategy challenged long-standing taboos about racial stereotyping, while allowing Colescott to achieve his stated purpose to “interject blacks into art history.” As he transformed familiar images to forge new, unexplored social meanings and implications, Colescott became a pioneer in the reemergence of figuration in the 1970s and in the strategies of appropriation in the 1980s.

Despite its unparalleled pedigree, however, Colescott’s work continues to be mired in controversy because of his blunt and crude gestural painting style and his transgressive examinations of race and gender. Colescott is particularly skillful at shocking us by dealing with the issues that we usually shy away from, or only speak of in secret, and then delivering what has been described as a “one-two punch” that forces us to grapple with the artistic, political, social and historical meanings of his images.

Co-curated by Lowery Stokes Sims and Matthew Weseley, and organized by Raphaela Platow, the Contemporary Arts Center’s Alice & Harris Weston Director and Chief Curator. Following its debut in Cincinnati, the exhibition will travel to the Portland Art Museum, Chicago Cultural Center and Akron Art Museum.

Major support of the exhibition has been provided by the Henry Luce Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, and Richard Rosenthal; the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts for the research phase of the exhibition and the exhibition itself; and the Harold & Arlene Schnitzer CARE Foundation for its support of the catalogue. The exhibition was also awarded a Sotheby’s Prize in 2018 in recognition of curatorial excellence and its exploration of an overlooked and under-represented area of art history.
1919
1980
Acrylic on canvas
Courtesy of the Estate and Blum & Poe, Los Angeles/New York/Tokyo

Colescott was born in Oakland, CA in 1925. This painting celebrates the pioneering spirit of Colescott’s parents, Lydia Hutton Colescott and Warrington Colescott, Sr. Following the famous exhortation of John Babsone Lane Soule (widely attributed to publisher Horace Greeley) in the mid-19th century to “Go West,” Colescott’s parents moved from New Orleans to Oakland in 1919. Colescott evokes 19th century silhouette traditions in the bust-length profile depictions of his parents, who are nestled in pink clouds facing each other across the composition. He has dispersed various elements—a tipi, a moose, a house, spotted mustang, a cowboy, an oil well, a goat, and mountain ranges—throughout a multicolored map of the United States. In the center, a large tree in a cut away space supports the nest of two birds, representing Colescott’s parents, who tend to two chicks, which represent the artist and his older brother Warrington, Jr. The garbage that litters the clouds represents what Colescott described in 1981 as the “used underwear, popular trash, studio sweepings...that didn’t pass art history.”

Section Text: Getting Started

Soon after graduating from high school in 1943, Colescott enlisted in the army and served in Europe. In 1946, he enrolled in San Francisco State University and then the University of California, Berkeley. In 1949, he went to France on the GI Bill, where he studied in the studio of the French modernist Fernand Léger. When Colescott arrived in Paris, he brought with him a portfolio of works on paper in the abstract style. The modernist pioneer explained to Colescott that he had turned away from his earlier involvement with abstraction because it was not accessible to ordinary people. Colescott decided to adjust to the situation and work from the models and props that Léger had set up in his teaching studio. As he made the transition in his own work, Colescott produced works imitative of Léger’s.
**Untitled**  
1949  
Oil on canvas  
Collection of Lauren McIntosh, Berkeley, CA  

This work—never before exhibited in public—is in the collection of Colescott’s cousin Lauren McIntosh, who was given it by the artist. It indicates his style of painting when he was working on his graduate degree at Berkeley. What is striking is the interplay of rectangular and trapezoidal planes, which predicate how he organized his compositions later in his career despite their more figurative orientation.

**Relationship**  
1949  
Oil on canvas  
Courtesy of the Estate and Blum & Poe, Los Angeles/New York/Tokyo

**Rue St. Marceaux**  
1949  
Gouache on paper  
Courtesy of the Estate and Blum & Poe, Los Angeles/New York/Tokyo
Homage à Ferdinand Léger
1950
Pen and graphite on paper
Courtesy of the Estate and Blum & Poe, Los Angeles/New York/Tokyo

Aussi Assis
1955-1956
Oil on canvas
Courtesy of the Estate and Blum & Poe, Los Angeles/New York/Tokyo

After receiving a master’s degree from Berkeley, although he would have preferred to work with students on the college level, Colescott went to work teaching art to middle school students in the public school system in Seattle, Washington. He began to free himself of Léger’s influence. His paintings of this period show how he began to engage with the more figurative aspects of Abstract Expressionism, as seen in the loose, vigorous brushstrokes of Willem de Kooning, and the gestural figuration developed by artists on the west coast.

Flowers
1958-1959
Oil on canvas
Courtesy of the Estate and Blum & Poe, Los Angeles/New York/Tokyo
White Bowl (Distance Traversed)
1962
Oil on canvas
Collection of Jordan D. Schnitzer

The works that Colescott created in Oregon—where he moved in 1957 to teach at Portland State College—are less brushy in character and are more aligned to the work of Bay Area figurative painters such as Elmer Bischoff, who had briefly been Colescott’s teacher at Berkeley.

View of Columbia Gorge
1960
Oil on canvas
Collection of Jordan D. Schnitzer

Expectation
1963
Acrylic on canvas
Courtesy of the Estate and Blum & Poe, Los Angeles/New York/Tokyo

This painting, done on the eve of Colescott’s sojourn in Egypt, is notable for its elaborate details of the interior around the nude study, as seen in the pattern of the back walls and rug at the lower left. We also see how he uses checkered patterned elements—garments, floors, tablecloths, etc.—to activate space, and to create a spatial bridge between the table on which the figure leans and her lap as she sits in the chair. The complexity of the planes created by the walls, floor, folding screen and the blue structure to the left reminds us of the early untitled painting from 1946 in this exhibition.
We can see similar elements in *Interior II - Homage to Roy Lichtenstein*, painted three decades later, in which Colescott has inserted a black woman into the Pop artist’s original interior. As critic Martin Lobel has noted: “Through his alterations to the image, Colescott forces us to see the literal but also figurative (read: racialized) whiteness on which the coolness and detachment of Lichtenstein’s image—and, by extension, that of Pop in general—depends.” This demonstrates how Colescott’s challenge to western art truisms was ongoing throughout his career.

*Interior II - Homage to Roy Lichtenstein*
1991
Acrylic on canvas
Private collection

**Section Text**

In 1964, Colescott applied for a position at the American Research Center in Cairo, Egypt and became the first artist-in-residence at the Center in the fall of that year. Traveling to Egypt was perhaps the most pivotal turning point in Colescott’s life and career. He was immediately enamored with his new environment, which was very different from the cool, lush Pacific Northwest where he had lived for the past several years. It felt like the change that he had been seeking.

**Overhead Quote**

“I was haunted by the spirit of these dead queens and felt that I could make out their images in the surrounding rocks and crevices.”
We Await Thee
1964
Oil on canvas
Portland Art Museum, Portland, Oregon. Gift of the Artist, © 1964 Robert Colescott, 66.60

Dr. Ehrlich’s Magic Bullet
1968
Acrylic on canvas
Courtesy of the Estate and Blum & Poe, Los Angeles/New York/Tokyo

Nubian Queen
1966
Acrylic on canvas
Private collection, New York City, NY

Colescott’s Egyptian paintings present more abstract representations of the figure in space. On the one hand this could signify a return to earlier stylistic interests, and on the other it might be said that this effect was inspired by the eroded reliefs of the Valley of the Queens, an ancient burial ground south of Cairo. The partly effaced surfaces of these reliefs, with the fragmentary remnants of faces and figures, suggested to Colescott a spirit world or picture of the afterlife, which was, of course, a cornerstone of early Egyptian religion. The figures are sometimes fragmentary or upside down. There is no attempt to describe actual space, as the paintings are built up through large areas of pure color.
Colescott returned to the United States in 1969-70, settling in Oakland, California where he had grown up. His style morphed from the lively zones of color and figuration that marked his Egyptian paintings into a cartoonish style inspired by the comic strips that he enjoyed as a child. In addition, they were also reflective of the countercultural imagery of his west coast contemporaries, such as Joan Brown, Carlos Villa, Robert Arneson, Roy de Forest, William Wiley and H.C Westermann, as well as the funk cartoonist Robert Crumb. Their work was characterized by an irreverent, no-holds barred approach to making art that reflected a Bay Area sensibility that made it a hotbed of political activism and artistic ferment, having been a key site of the counterculture in the late 1960s and early ’70s.

Colescott would have his debut on the New York art scene in the 1970s when he showed at the Spectrum and Razor Galleries. His fresh approach to figuration lead to his being included in the groundbreaking exhibition Not for Laughs Only curated by Marcia Tucker at the New Museum in 1981. His initial strategy was to revisit the work of prominent artists in history such as Vincent van Gogh, Eugène Delacroix, Emanuel Leutze and Pablo Picasso, and selectively render figures in the original compositions as black people. This allowed him to address subject matter that was largely ignored by art history, while introducing a larger universe for aesthetic and artistic discourse.

Olympia
ca. 1959
Oil on canvas
Collection of the Jordan Schnitzer Family Foundation

Along with From a Fragment Sargent, painted in 1962, this composition is a prelude to Colescott’s appropriations of western art history in the 1970s. Here he pays homage to the famous 1863 painting of the same title by Édouard Manet in the collection of the Musée d’Orsay, Paris. Colescott softens the confrontational attitude of the main figure in the Manet and brings the black maid into the same light and plane so that she is more in dialogue with Olympia. Her posture provocatively suggests it is she who is bringing the offering of flowers to Olympia.
From a Fragment Sargent
1962
Oil on canvas
Courtesy of the Estate and Blum & Poe, Los Angeles/New York/Tokyo

*From a Fragment Sargent* was inspired by the 1881 painting *The Daughters of Edward Darley Boit* by John Singer Sargent in the collection of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Colescott compresses the scene to focus on the daughter at the left and the large blue and white vase that illustrates the vogue for Asian ceramics in the late 1800s.

Legend Dimly Told
1961
Oil on canvas
Courtesy of the Estate and Blum and Poe, Los Angeles/New York/Tokyo

Eat Dem Taters
1975
Acrylic on canvas
Rosenblum Family

By the mid-1970s, Colescott was fully engaged in his appropriation of art history. *Eat Dem Taters*—a spoof of van Gogh’s *Potato Eaters*—is particularly notorious. Here Colescott replaces van Gogh’s somber peasants with exuberantly grinning minstrel figures in order to send up the myth of the “happy darky.” The notion that blacks could be happy with very little was a staple of pre-World War II Hollywood films. This concept was also included in school textbooks of the period, in which blacks were described as fortunate to be enslaved, since slavery removed them from their previous, barbaric circumstances in Africa. Colescott effectively uses the stylization of racist stereotypes of blacks to draw viewers into the painting; and, regardless of their reaction, he forces them to confront their racist attitudes, anger or compliance.
Study for George Washington Carver Crossing the Delaware
1974
Pencil on paper
Benny Andrews Nene Humphrey Collection

George Washington Carver Crossing the Delaware: Page from an American History Textbook 1975
Acrylic on canvas
Private collection

In George Washington Carver Crossing the Delaware: Page from an American History Textbook, Colescott replaced George Washington in Emanuel Leutze’s famous painting in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum with the renowned agricultural researcher. Colescott replaced the rest of the crew with a literal boatload of stereotypes lifted from Hollywood movies: a chef, a barefoot fisherman, a musician strumming a banjo, a man swilling moonshine, a shoeshine boy and a mammy figure performing fellatio on the flag bearer at the center of the composition. Colescott has reduced the size and impressiveness of the boat in the original 1851 painting and undermined its seaworthiness with a tin patch. He has also enlarged the American flag to convey the idea that the boat and its inhabitants constitute a metaphor for America itself. George Washington Carver Crossing the Delaware is the most gleeful and unbridled attack on racist ideology in his oeuvre, and it would become his most famous work, maintaining a notoriety that has persisted to today.
While not a direct reference to Théodore Géricault’s 1818-19 painting, *Raft of the Medusa* in the Louvre Museum, the distribution of body parts and debris relates more closely again to the territory Colescott staked out for himself: “used underwear, popular trash, studio sweepings... that didn’t pass art history.” As opposed to the Géricault composition, which is a scene of desperation with little hope of rescue, Colescott’s reminds us more of the wreck of the Titanic, particularly as portrayed in the 1997 movie directed by James Cameron. We can bring to this image the observation of the critic Vivian Raynor, who noted in 1987 that Colescott “knows that the ship of civilization is sinking” but “he remains on board.”

In *Beauty is in the Eye of the Beholder*, Colescott depicts himself at an easel working on a version of Henri Matisse’s *La Danse* of 1910 in the collection of the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg, Russia. He has turned away from the painting to look at a woman in a state of partial undress. According to Colescott, the painting is an allegory of his creative process, in which he is caught between the world of his imagination, which he depicts on canvas, and the real world, with all its distractions and allurements. In a 1981 interview with artist/ writer Joe Lewis, Colescott notes that he was “involved with these non-flesh-and-blood women” in the Matisse, while he was “also faced with the flesh-and-blood woman. It’s a conflict between art and reality.”
Les Demoiselles d'Alabama: Vestidas
1985
Acrylic on canvas
Seattle Art Museum. General Acquisition Fund, Bill and Melinda Gates Art Acquisition Fund, Margaret E. Fuller Purchase Fund, and Patricia Denny Art Acquisition Fund, 2016.12

This is one of two appropriations of Pablo Picasso’s 1907 Demoiselles d’Avignon in the Museum of Modern Art that Colescott painted in 1985. He designated the two versions “desnuda” (nude) and “vestida” (clothed) referring as well to Francisco Goya’s two representations of a “maja” (low-class woman). The Demoiselles d’Alabama are rendered in Colescott’s characteristic fleshy, gestural style, which contrasts with Picasso’s more linear, graphic style. This version shows the figures dressed in exuberant clothing and styles. He explained that his appropriations were “about sources and ends,” as Picasso “started with European art and abstracted through African art, producing ‘Africanism,’ but keeping one foot in European art.” Colescott, however, “began with Picasso’s Africanism and moved toward European art, keeping one foot in Africanism.” This anti-academic, iconoclastic approach to figuration indicate Colescott’s explorations of the aesthetic issues surrounding black and brown women. It crucially touches on the profound challenges around self-image among these women in the context of European cultural domination.

Dulacrow’s Masterwork: A Mockumentary Film
1976
Digital video, color, sound, Ed. 1/10
Duration: 43 minutes, 50 seconds
Rubell Family Collection, Miami, FL

Art historian Lizzetta Lefalle Collins reports that Colescott produced this video, Dulacrow’s Masterwork: A Mockumentary Film, in 1976 to document a performance that was presented at the San Francisco Art Institute where he was teaching. Colescott is seen as his alter ego “Eugene Dulacrow” giving a slide lecture on the iconic 1830 painting Liberty Leading the People by Eugène Delacroix, which is in the collection of the Louvre. Set to the music of the modernist, French composer Edgard Varèse, the video is Colescott’s satirical version of what he considered boring and pedantic art history lectures. Colescott painted his own version of the Delacroix painting entitled Homage to Delacroix: Liberty Leading the People, also in 1976, while masquerading as Dulacrow and listening to recordings of Varèse’s Intégrales, Density 21.5, Ionisation and Octandre.
These compositions represent the composer’s experimentations with sound and rhythm to find new possibilities within familiar elements of music, similar to Colescott’s experiments with art historical icons.

Section text: Retelling the Official Story

As in his reconstructions of masterpieces of western art history, Colescott enjoyed debunking the narrative twists and turns of the “official” versions of biblical stories, as seen in his version of the story of the Garden of Eden in A Legend Dimly Told (whose title revisits a 1961 painting also in this exhibition) or Susanna and the Elders (Novelty Hotel), and in his ahistorical encounters between Aunt Jemima and Colonel Sanders. Aunt Jemima, in particular, seems to have captured his imagination. In two additional story lines, she becomes the consort of a western gold rusher, Cactus Jack, or the impressive avatar of Willem de Kooning’s awesome image, Woman I. As Colescott noted in 1989, “I think the way I have appropriated painting is subversive because my version of the Dejeuner sur l’herbe or the de Kooning Woman puts into question the ownership of the idea. The fact that the original work can be redone questions its value.” He also noted that if he created “something that really sticks in people’s minds” when they see the original version, “they’re going to think of mine.”

Susanna and the Elders (Novelty Hotel)
1980
Acrylic on canvas
Seattle Art Museum. Mary Arrington Small Estate Acquisition Fund, 84.170

This is a particularly provocative retelling of the biblical story of Susanna and the Elders. While Susanna is usually portrayed as the victim of inappropriate voyeurism of tormenting men, here she turns the table and becomes the tormenter, performing a virtual strip tease in front them. As in several compositions in this exhibition, Colescott puts himself in this composition, here as a Peeping Tom furtively looking in on the scene through a basement window.
Susanna and the Elders
1980
Colored pencil and graphite on paper
Private collection, Minneapolis

Susanna and the Elders
1980
Colored pencil and graphite on paper
Courtesy of the Estate and Blum & Poe, Los Angeles/New York/Tokyo

The Colonel Sanders and Aunt Jemima Trilogy: Instant Chicken!
1972
Acrylic on canvas
Private collection, New York City, NY

The Colonel Sanders and Aunt Jemima Trilogy: Instant Chicken!, Cactus Jack in El Dorado, and I Gets a Thrill, Too, When I Sees De Koo are shown together to illustrate the complexity of Colescott’s reading of the iconic and controversial character of Aunt Jemima. Instant Chicken! is one of three completed in 1972, which involve the characters of Aunt Jemima and Colonel Sanders. The compositions implicitly comment on how black cooking was co-opted by white commercial interests, and this particular pairing allows Colescott to remix his historical sources. Aunt Jemima was a fictional character (originally played by Nancy Green) who was created in the late 19th century as a character to brand a ready mixed self-rising flour for Pearl Milling Company. “Colonel” Harland Sanders was an entrepreneur who finalized his fried chicken recipe for public consumption in the 1940s. In Instant Chicken!, the kitchen area of the restaurant is dominated by Colonel Sanders and a white maître d’. Aunt Jemima grins and claps her hands at the lower right, while several black cooks frame the composition. Each figure in the painting is identified by name and the presence of “Sonny Washington” at the lower right represents the
community of African Americans that Colescott depicts in his 1987 *Knowledge of the Past is the Key to the Future: The Other Washingtons.*

*Cactus Jack in El Dorado*
1977
Acrylic on canvas
Collection of the Newark Museum, Gift of Gregory A. Lunt, 1988

*Cactus Jack in Eldorado* is one of two compositions from 1977 that shows Aunt Jemima roughing it on the frontier, cooking a meal, as Cactus Jack pans for gold. These compositions directly relate to Colescott’s frequent evocation of the western myths and stories that dominated his childhood in movies and books. The landscape, which has been an important element in his work since the 1960s, literally carries the story as the river flows from the top of the composition to the foreground.

*I Gets a Thrill, Too, When I Sees De Koo*
1978
Acrylic on canvas
The Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University, Gift of Senator and Mrs. William Bradley

The most notable apparition of Aunt Jemima is in Colescott’s 1978 appropriation of Willem de Kooning’s *Woman I* of 1952-53 (Museum of Modern Art), one of the icons of Abstract Expressionism. *I Gets a Thrill, Too, When I Sees De Koo* replaces the grimacing figure in the de Kooning with a mischievous grinning avatar of Aunt Jemima. But this painting is also a variation of a Pop Art riff: *I Get a Thrill When I See Bill* by Mel Ramos, where the head of the woman in the De Kooning is replaced with headshot of a contemporary 1970s model. Colescott navigates a path from the gestural distortion of the de Kooning, through the glamorized version by Ramos. Thus, his Aunt Jemima acquires the sexual gloss of the Ramos, even as Colescott circles back technically to the gestural figuration of the de Kooning and the 1950s and 60s figural trends from which he has developed his style.
Section Text: Identity Politics

Since the 1980s, the issue of identity has preoccupied our increasingly globalized society. In Colescott’s oeuvre, that sense of identity was explored in various ways, including how he saw himself as a rogue romantic figure and an artist. Colescott was an astute and diligent student of cultural history and employed metaphor and allusion to deal with a variety of current events he experienced throughout his life. He deftly dealt with the ironic situation of the black soldier, the dichotomy between domestic policy and foreign relations; interracial relationships were considered along with political assassinations, the struggles in the Middle East, and the US/Mexico border. His New Orleans, creole roots also drew him to the complexities of interracial identity, and his inherently bourgeois upbringing forced him to deal with the risks of assimilation—alienation from community, the possible loss of positive self-imagery and the endurance of trite stereotyping as the exotic “other.”

Real Crow
1976
Acrylic on canvas on wooden panel
Courtesy of the Estate and Blum & Poe, Los Angeles/New York/Tokyo

Colescott was deeply affected by the representations of blacks in the mass media, so he created many works that address their marginalization. Some of the most effective works turn familiar images on their heads by inserting black and other minority figures in situations usually associated in advertising, television or film with white Americans. This composition demonstrates Colescott’s interest in the interpretive possibilities of product brands and advertising strategies.

The depiction of the crow in top hat and smoking a cigar is typical of the anthropomorphism that was seen in cartoon characters such as Heckel and Jeckel. Crows have a disruptive reputation both in mythology and popular lore. On the one hand, they are symbols of bad luck and death, and on the other, symbols of life magic, mystery and destiny. With reference to this image we can contemplate the fact that Old Crow bourbon is a signature product of the state of Kentucky where it was first distilled by James C. Crow in the 1830s. It’s original logo, a crow perched atop grains of barley, is
rumored to have been a symbol of the bridging of the North and South during the Civil War.

*Shirley Temple Black and Bill Robinson White*
1980
Acrylic on canvas

The title of this painting demonstrates how Colescott exploited the convenience of Temple’s married name to achieve his code switch with regard to the racial identity of the two well-known protagonists. Susan Gubar suggests that “As in so many of his other paintings, this picture converts characters traditionally portrayed as white into blacks, switching the races so as to ridicule, first our assumptions about white hegemony in cultural scripts and, second, the caricaturing that infects almost all depictions of African Americans in mass-produced as well as elite art.” The switch also causes us to wonder if America would ever accept a young black girl as its sweetheart and whether it would tolerate the image of a white male obsequiously tap dancing. Gubar notes that Colescott’s self-described “one-two punch” in this instance “pertains to the shocking stories it uncovers about race and sex” and “the significance of the racechanged child in terms of sexuality, lineage, and cultural endowment.”

*Listening to Amos and Andy*
1982
Acrylic on canvas
Chrysler Museum of Art, Norfolk, VA. Gift of the family of Joel B. Cooper, in memory of Mary and Dudley Coper 2002.26.4

In a 1981 interview with Joe Lewis, Colescott noted how when “Amos and Andy” was broadcast on the radio, the characters could be played by white people. “Everybody listened to them...,” and “it’s ironic that there were black families out there listening to Amos and Andy and visualizing them as black.” He noted further that this was “a painting about human weakness, but it’s not a pessimistic painting. It’s about how people believe something that isn’t so, how they’re hypnotized into believing what they want to believe. I think it looks gently at these black human beings, but not so gently at Amos and Andy characters. I made them kind of raunchy looking, but I empathize with the people that are being led down the path by this kind of commercial blackness.”
As the story goes, in 1966 when Emperor Haile Selassie made a state visit to Jamaica, he was surprised at the tumultuous reception given to him by over 100,000 members of the Rastafarian group who had constituted around the idea that he was God. This type of messianic belief has been observed among populations of black and brown peoples who sought a savior to bring them out of the oppression of the mainstream power structures. One thinks of the emergence of the Ghost Dance phenomenon among Native Americans in the 1880s, or Marcus Garvey and his “back to Africa” message among African Americans in the 1920s. In this painting, Colescott shows a black American, dressed in a tropical print shirt, finding his own messianic rescue. He is supported by Haile Selassie and another, the Sudanese religious leader Muhammad Ahmad bin Abd Allah, designated the “Mahdi” or “Redeemer,” who fought against Egyptian and British forces for Sudan.

Colescott’s oblique reference in the title of this painting to the so-called Gulf War of 1990-1991, which is also known as Operation Desert Storm, is matched by his enigmatic reference to Tell el-Iswid, an archaeological site on the eastern delta of the Nile, which revealed the existence of a fourth millennium culture. Colescott indicates the location of his Iswid on the yellow shape of a country that frames the Emir’s profile. Ghostly apparitions of a veiled woman, a gun-toting man and men wearing keffiyeh form beneath him. These specters interlace with two nude females, who are chained together at the wrists as they sit on a pile of oil barrels and bananas, both products of the Middle East. Colescott may be encouraging us to contemplate how countries can be economically stymied and politically limited by the resources that are the very sources of their wealth.
Critic David Bonetti wrote: “There is often more to Colescott than what first appears.” In his reading of this painting—which examines the reality of African/ Native American relations—he focuses on the “passage of golden paint scumbled atop the fiery red,” which he finds “masterful.” Furthermore, “the figures along the bottom of the painting, variously representing intermingled black and Indian peoples, exhibit an impressive array of painting techniques and style,” demonstrating that Colescott’s “painting skills might be the first thing overlooked.”

A Visit from Uncle Charlie
1995
Acrylic on canvas
Weatherspoon Art Gallery, University of North Carolina, Greensboro. Museum purchase with funds from the Benefactors Fund, 1997

Here Colescott addresses the phenomenon of racial passing by light-skinned African Americans—perhaps a reference to the racial dynamics in his own family. Here “Uncle Charlie” is positioned as the literal “dark sheep” of the family. He dominates the center of the composition, blowing the cover of his relatives who are trying to pass for white. In a witty reference to the fact that the secret has been exposed, Colescott provides literal visual representations of the popular quips: “a skeleton in the closet” and “the cat’s out of the bag.”
Painted over 20 years ago, this painting is another instance of Colescott’s prescience in terms of national and world events. As we contemplate the daily turmoil on the Mexico/US border, we can take note that Colescott observed in 1997 that this painting is about “human relations at the border. The will to get along in honesty and understanding is not about language differences. It’s about character and perception.”

Section Text: History Redux

Colescott embarked on a series of paintings in the 1980s whose titles played on the platitude “those who ignore the past are doomed to repeat it;” but, the titles provide a slight switch in nuance: Knowledge of the Past Is the Key to the Future. In this exhibition, works from this series examine the overlooked role of the African American Matthew Henson, who actually led the way to the North Pole as part of Admiral Peary’s expedition team (Matthew Henson and the Quest for The North Pole), the legacy of miscegenation and unacknowledged ancestry (The Other Washingtons), and the social and economic challenges of the disenfranchised (Upside Down Jesus and the Politics of Survival). In these paintings, Colescott not only captures the kernel of the event, he surrounds it with “subtexts, pretexts, post-texts and narratives-within-narratives” as how critic Henry Louis Gates, Jr. once described the work of writer Ishmael Reed.
In this painting, and *Kitchen Assassination*, Colescott offers a more literal interpretation of two tragedies that forever transformed American’s sense of stability: the 1963 assassination of President John Fitzgerald Kennedy and that of his brother Robert Kennedy in 1968, who was in the midst of his campaign for the presidency of the United States. *Assassin Down* presents Colescott’s version of the murder of JFK’s assassin Lee Harvey Oswald by Jack Ruby as Oswald was being escorted in police custody. *Kitchen Assassination* captures the moment when Sirhan Sirhan fired the shots that killed RFK. In both compositions, it is interesting to note the presence of the black figures. While they play a key role in the 1980s history paintings, here they are relegated to the margins of the narrative in service roles. It was this positioning of blacks in history that Colescott sought to redress a few years later in works such as *George Washington Carver Crossing the Delaware: A Lesson in American History* (1975).

*Knowledge of the Past Is the Key to the Future: Matthew Henson and the Quest for the North Pole* 1986
Acrylic on canvas
Albritton Collection
**Knowledge of the Past is the Key to the Future: Upside Down Jesus and the Politics of Survival**

1987
Acrylic on canvas
Portland Art Museum, Oregon. Museum Purchase: Robert Hale Ellis Jr. Fund for the Blanche Eloise Day Ellis and Robert Hale Ellis Memorial Collection, 88.3

The specter of the figure in a red sweater at the left of the composition, who points a gun at the viewer, is a powerful evocation of events that have shaken American society too often over the last few years. Perhaps the alienation that is seen as a cause of school shootings is indicated by the fact that the relationship between the figures is random. Each one of the individual figures seems to be an independent entity absorbed in their individual stories. Scale and perspective are immaterial as we see the large reclining figure with a gunshot wound in his chest to the right; the male student nonchalantly points a gun directly out towards the spectator to the right; the anomalous bi-colored nude female who dominates the space just off center. Her large head on a relatively slim body is eerily reminiscent of one of Gauguin’s figural sculptures, such as *Tahitian Girl* of 1890 in the collection of the Nasher Sculpture Center.
Colescott’s parents left New Orleans, Louisiana, for Oakland, California, just after the end of World War I, in search of a better life. His mother had been a teacher before the war, and his father worked as a waiter on the Southern Pacific Railroad. His parents hoped that the move would lead to new possibilities for assimilation into mainstream society for themselves and their children. The aspirations of people of African descent to rise in society and join the middle class became a major theme of Colescott’s work. Now in the 21st Century, we are becoming more conscious of the frailties of the myth of the American Dream. While it generally means economic, social and political advancement, today that notion is inextricably caught up in issues around equity, immigration, migration, economic revival in the face of massive offshore outsourcing of production and products and institutionalized racism. Additionally, gender roles and sexual preference have expanded the scope of the analysis of the reality of the American Dream.

*Colored T.V.*
1977
Acrylic on canvas
San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Gift of Vicki and Kent Logan

Colescott has relied on various meanings of the word “colored” to inform this scene of a black woman watching television. On the one hand, the word was used to refer to black people in a rather pejorative way, and on the other, refers to advances in television technology that permitted the transmission of images in color as opposed to black and white. Interestingly, the image on the television is that of a blond, white woman, reminding us of the lack of diversity in the media, which began to be addressed in the late 1960s and 1970s with the debut of television shows such as *Julia, The Jeffersons, Benson, What’s Happening,* and *The Flip Wilson Show.*
Tea for Two (The Collector)
1980
Acrylic on canvas

Marching to a Different Drummer
1989
Acrylic on canvas
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Ernest Wadsworth Longfellow Fund

This painting represents the conflicting values that contrast what is thought of as a more Afrocentric approach to life, as opposed to one that represents the assimilation of African Americans into the larger American society. As curator Taylor L. Poulin noted: “The white hands beating a drum at the top of the canvas strike the pattern according to which the suited man evidently lives, but his anguished expression and the ball and chain locked on his left ankle disclose an internal struggle between lifestyle[s].”

Section Text: Gender, Race and Beauty

Colescott’s approach to gender, race and beauty was specific to his generation, and the period in which the paintings were done. As seen in television programs such as Mad Men, the post-World War II era in American culture was characterized by male privilege and female submission in the home, the office and out in the world. Colescott inevitably goes to the heart of the matter with his deployment of images of women as vehicles of desire—specifically in the context of commentaries on war, national boosterism and the economy. The dynamics of race intersect with gender and the promotion of mythic notions of what America was for its inhabitants and the world. Pin-up imagery therefore assumes a specific reference point for Colescott as he creates these female avatars of black and white beauty.
As seen in the paintings in this exhibition, the figural representations of women in Colescott’s work of the 1970s are set in the context of endlessly witty and exasperating visual puns that deconstruct popular advertising slogans, and popular idiomatic sayings. Displayed as they are as busty, hippy, even cellulite-y characters, they are at the service of the artist’s sardonic humor. But the question is: are they agents or vehicles? What lies behind those winsome, seemingly vacuous gazes? Are they smart cookies under Betty Boop guises, or forbearing ingénues ready to get what they want à la Mae West? What the consideration of popular imagery and its reception in the wider American cultures reveals is that what is there is not the whole story.

*Miss Black Oakland*

*c. 1967*

Acrylic on Egyptian linen

The Rachofsky Collection

Miss Black Oakland stands in her gold bikini and contestant sash smiling out at the spectators. Behind her is a more abstracted version of the colorful landscapes that appear in his paintings of the mid-1960s that seems to show a blue mountain with wispy white clouds leading down to areas of ochre, Kelly green, yellow and hunter green. But Miss Oakland is practically upstaged by the white female who stands in a spotlight created by a man’s hand holding a flashlight. Her cast shadow is rather monstrous, as if Colescott was commenting on the sham of appearances that we value. Even more mysteriously, the lower legs and shoes of three male figures—rendered in black and white—hang above the arch of the abstracted landscape. Colescott has eschewed usual perspective systems and reoriented our sense of order. Despite their truncated presences—these hand, legs and feet—and intrusive character, these male entities exude a power dynamic that makes it clear that the women in this composition are subject to their scrutiny.
Havana Corona  
1970  
Acrylic on canvas  
Brooklyn Museum, Gift of Brooke and Carolyn Alexander,  
1991.270

_Havana Corona_ became the compositional prototype for several of Colescott’s works in the 1970s that featured a centralized female figure. They took on some of the aspects of the classic pin-up, which, for Colescott, emerges directly out of images he encountered as a soldier in World War II. While it seems at first to be a Pop Art engagement of product placement, _Havana Corona_ is much more complex, as it examines the dynamics of race and gender in the Latin American context, where the legacies of assimilation and _mestizaje_ (mixture) often resulted in contradictory phenomena—emotionally and psychologically. Colescott captures this by placing the disembodied hand of someone who is obviously a prosperous, upper class white man at the margins of the composition. The hand holds a cigar, the smoke from which morphs into a cloud-like element that in turn frames a floral crown hovering over the head of the dark-skinned woman. A dandified biracial man is suspended at the right and to the lower left is a bubble in which we see a sexual encounter that would have produced this mixed-race individual.

_Bye, Bye Miss American Pie_  
1971  
Acrylic on canvas  
Collection of the Akron Art Museum, Museum Acquisition Fund

The title evokes the 1971 song by Don McClean, which captured the spirit and disillusions of American society in the throes of the Vietnam war and counter-culture explorations of its youth. The title of the song and the painting were meant to convey the notion of opportunity and advancement in American society as getting a slice of the American pie. Colescott places a slice of the pie on the central female figure as a fig leaf element. At the lower register a black soldier in camouflage seems to fire his rifle aimlessly at some unseen target to the right. Is that an expression of his determination to earn entry into the American Dream, or of frustration at his failure to do so?
American Beauty
1976
Acrylic on canvas
Courtesy of the Estate and Blum & Poe, Los Angeles/New York/Tokyo

Although it was painted in the 1970s, this painting assumes a special significance in the context of today’s #metoo movement. Colescott lays bare the sexual manipulation of women in fashion, beauty pageants, sports, and the movies, which indicate the pervasiveness of such behavior in society at large. We are confronted with the troubling truths that often lay behind media images that present women in glamorous, glossy guises.

Tin Gal
1976
Acrylic on canvas
Courtesy of the Estate and Blum & Poe, Los Angeles/New York/Tokyo

Colescott did several images of women composed of different substances—tin, cacti, etc.—that were intended to present metaphors for different stereotypical temperaments and personalities. Here the tin cowgirl brandishes her gun and Colescott has inscribed “fearless” and “avenger” in the composition. At the bottom he stenciled, “INVINCIBLE: HER ONLY FEAR IS COMING UN SCREWED,” a reference to the rude assessment of what men think ails strong, liberated women who refuse to accommodate their sexist expectations.

Tinhorn
1976
Graphite on paper
Courtesy of the Estate and Blum & Poe, Los Angeles/New York/Tokyo

Contrary to expectations, Colescott produced a drawing of the male counterpart of Tin Girl, who presents himself more as a dandy than a superhero. Colescott characterizes different parts of his anatomy as mechanized elements (“ball joint”) and inscribes at the lower right: “the deck
is stacked and...,” and suggestively declares that “the tinhorn plays for keeps.”

**The Three Graces: Art, Sex and Death**  
1981  
Acrylic on canvas  

This painting draws on a theme from antiquity that was revived in the work of Italian artists such as Raphael and Sandro Botticelli during the Renaissance. The three female figures usually represent the qualities of “charm,” “beauty” and “creativity.” Colescott brings a more contemporary nuance to these avatars, adding almost a punk quality as he characterized them as representing “Art,” “Sex” and “Death.” The Graces are usually represented nude, with their arms around each other’s shoulders as they stand in a circle with one figure facing left, a center figure standing with her back to the viewer and the third standing facing right. In Colescott’s version, the figures are rendered more individually rather than as three versions of the same figure. They have their own personalities, skin tones, clothing and accessories.

**Overhead Quote:**

“I thought a lot about Cezanne’s bathers and Matisse’s bathers, and thought I would do some bathers. They’re about competing standards of beauty, and also about the intrusion of the white world on a black world. It also poses the idea of a beauty parade.”

**Big Bathers: Another Judgment**  
1984  
Acrylic on canvas  
Delaware Art Museum. F.V. du Pont Acquisition Fund, 1986  

Despite efforts towards diversity during the last four decades, contemporary media still projects stereotypes of female beauty that privilege the
proportions and images preferred by the fashion industry and media. Here Colescott draws on the Greek myth of the Judgment of Paris to tackle the challenges that women face to assert a positive self-image that deconstructs the prevailing ideals. This gathering of four women offers a more varied view of physical beauty and integrity with their different body types, skin color and hair texture. This painting is one of a number of paintings in which Colescott dealt with the subject of Bathers. The locales of these paintings are invariably secluded pools of water surrounded by vegetation and rocks. As seen in this version of Legend Dimly Told, which Colescott first explored in the early 1960s.

The Judgment of Paris
1984
Acrylic on canvas
Collection of Jordan D. Schnitzer

- Consider the reference image by Cranach of The Judgement of Paris
- In this image, the white, blond woman is chosen (Venus)
- In short, the Judgement of Paris happens during the wedding of Peleus and Thetis (parents of Achilles). Eris, goddess of discord was not invited. In retaliation, she threw a golden apple marked "To the fairest one" into the celebration. Three goddesses claimed the apple: Hera, Athena and Aphrodite. Paris, Prince of Troy, was told to judge—Aphrodite (Venus) bribed him with Helen, the most beautiful women in the world, to be chosen.

Exotique
1994
Acrylic, gel medium on canvas
Collection Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, T. B. Walker Acquisition Fund, 1995

In Exotique, Colescott revives his habit of insertion of dialogue and commentary within the composition as figures engage in a conversation. The black feline nuzzles her feet as she declares in a dialogue bubble: “Yo tambien!” We can assume that she is declaring “Me too” in response to the black woman, stylishly garbed in kente print who responds “*S.V.P, Cher Monsieur…Afrocentrique” to her dancing companion, who declares flirtatiously: “Vous etre tres exotique…Chere Madame!!” At the lower left, a hapless black figure declares something in Arabic cursive to the red headed nude woman. This painting, and Beauty is
Only Skin Deep, challenge our understanding of the narrative, while at the same time, allow us to exercise our own interpretative faculties.

**Venus I**
1996
Acrylic on canvas
Portland Art Museum, Oregon. Gift of Arlene and Harold Schnitzer

This painting relates to Colescott’s *Bad Habits* of 1983 where he deals with the subject of the artist’s studio. In the earlier painting, the nude model floats above the artist’s head as if she is an idea coming into being as he paints. In a continuation of Colescott’s ongoing examination of issues of beauty and race, here he shows the model sitting on a bench with her back to us, contemplating a mirror in which a reflection of black woman confronts her. While Colescott depicts himself at the easel capturing his *Bad Habits*, the easel in *Venus I* is anthropomorphic, with easel’s legs, a torso formed by a painting and a palette from which two precariously perched paintbrushes hang like arms and hands. A second palette with brushes poked through the thumbhole serves as the head. Colescott himself may appear as two specters in this painting: the illusive Cheshire Cat whose leering set of lips and teeth clinch a proverbial stogy, which materializes from a checkerboard tablecloth—the tail end of which is anchored by the buttocks of the Venus. Or, he could be the rather sketchy figure at the lower left that is reminiscent of one of Picasso’s self-presentations.

**Bad Habits**
1983
Acrylic on canvas
A Legend Dimly Told  
1982  
Acrylic on canvas  
Mott-Warsh Collection, Flint, Michigan

This is one of several paintings—including _Auvers sur Oise (Crow in the Wheatfield)_ of 1981 and _Lost in the Jardin des Plantes_ of 1982—in which Colescott presents a lush landscape as the focal point of the composition, while various human shenanigans go on at the lower edge/foreground of the composition, invariably presided over by an outsized character (Vincent van Gogh, Colescott). One wonders if Colescott was thinking of the character of the Lord (“De Lawd”) played by Rex Ingram in the 1936 film, _Green Pastures_, with its all black cast.

Carrie Mae Weems  
_Framed by Modernism (Seduced By One Another, Yet Bound by Certain Social Conventions; You Framed The Likes of Me & I Framed You, But We Were Both Framed By Modernism; & Even Though We Knew Better, We Continued That Time Honored Tradition of The Artist & His Model)_  
1996  
Silver gelatin prints with sandblasted text on glass panel  
Private collection

_Framed by Modernism_ was created by Carrie Mae Weems when she was commissioned by Miriam Roberts to make a portrait of Colescott for the catalogue of his installation at the Venice Biennale in 1997. Weems decided instead to explore the dynamics of the studio and the relationship between the artist and the model. In this situation, however, Weems is as much the artist as she is the model, so she posed herself in the nude assuming various poses in the corner at the back of Colescott’s studio. Colescott is positioned next to an easel at the front of the studio space with his back to Weems, his head in his hand or on his hip. The relative roles of the artist, model and viewer are in question, but in the end, it is Weems, who despite her diminutive presence, is in control of the situation. Weems noted she wanted to create an image which examines “the critical intersection between art and practice, men and women, and gender and identity, and notions about the object and the subject.”
Section Text:

Three preparatory drawings were done for a number works from the 1970s, in which Colescott depicts questionable juxtapositions of adults and children, which transform sentimental images of childhood innocence into outrageous mashups of interracial sex, pedophilia and colonialism. These include illustrations for a 1905 edition of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (originally published in 1851), *Hans Brinker and the Silver Skates* (first published in 1965 by Mary Mapes Dodge), poems from Robert Louis Stevenson’s *A Child’s Garden of Verses* (originally published in 1900) and Mark Twain’s 1884 *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.

As art historian Matthew Weseley has observed: “For Colescott, sex and race are inextricably mixed…and his paintings of the 1970s demolish many of the clichés regarding race with which he grew up. Like Dick Gregory and Richard Pryor—which he admired—Colescott assumed the role of the comic shaman, who addresses serious issues in a humorous way, leading the viewer to realize the absurdity of ideas that often go unquestioned.”

*Tom & Eva*
1974
Graphite on paper
Courtesy of the Estate and Blum & Poe, Los Angeles/New York/Tokyo
Rejected Advertisement for Droste’s Chocolate
1974
Graphite on paper
Courtesy of the Estate and Blum & Poe, Los Angeles/New York/Tokyo

Goddamn You
1973
Graphite on paper
Courtesy of the Estate and Blum & Poe, Los Angeles/New York/Tokyo

The Swing
1976
Graphite on paper
Courtesy of the Estate and Blum & Poe, Los Angeles/New York/Tokyo

The Wind
1976
Graphite on paper
Courtesy of the Estate and Blum & Poe, Los Angeles/New York/Tokyo
Auntie’s Skirts
1976
Graphite on paper
Courtesy of the Estate and Blum & Poe, Los Angeles/New York/Tokyo

My Shadow
1977
Crayon on paper
Michael Rosenfeld Gallery

Tom & Huck Finn
1975
Graphite on paper
Private collection

Lone Wolf in Paris
1977
Acrylic on canvas
Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Promised gift of Ed and Sandy Martin in honor of Howard N. Fox

Many who grew up watching Acme cartoons remember the wolf character (created by the renowned cartoonist Tex Avery) whose eyes would pop out of his head as he jumped into a lateral position when ogling and howling at a good-looking woman. One might see this image as an avatar of Colescott, who frequently visited Paris in the 1970s and 80s, after having spent time in Paris and the south of France after his Egyptian
sojourn in the 1960s. This painting is accompanied by three drawings that illustrate different aspects of the wolf character Strutting His Stuff, Checking It Out, and declaring, Yes Virginia.

Lone Wolf Trilogy (Strutting His Stuff, Checking It Out, Yes Virginia)
1976
Graphite on paper
Courtesy of the Estate and Blum & Poe, Los Angeles/New York/Tokyo

Section Text: Denouement

In the early 2000s, Colescott had to face the effects of Parkinson’s syndrome. Despite the physical challenges he faced, Colescott continued to paint, as his figurative style evolved into richly modulated compositions that became increasingly abstract. Works such as Alas, Jandava present a more esoteric narrative in a child-like scribbly style. In Pick a Ninny Rose and Sleeping Beauty, form, gesture, fully saturated color and blank space come together in works that are dream-like and nightmarish at the same time. It would seem that Colescott allowed his subconscious to roam freely in an unresolved way, which relates morphologically and compositionally to the character of his paintings in the first few years of the 21st century.

Overhead Quote:

“At this particular time people would like to feel a kind of intimacy in art. The move from the ideal and the classical, the need to feel and understand things and to identify things in the painting from their own lives—trivia,
violence, confusion—is an element that has been unaddressed for a long time in art. People today are concerned with it. There’s a distrust for art that doesn’t concern itself with it and a real appreciation for art that does."

Knowledge of the Past is the Key to the Future: St. Sebastian
1986
Acrylic on canvas
Private collection

In this painting, the body of the saint has become a perfectly bi-furcated hermaphrodite—black male/white female—shot through with the arrows. On either side of this figure float the heads of a white male and a black female, which are tethered together by nooses. As Colescott noted, he was dealing with the “interrelatedness of the races, common destiny, and the idea of survival…if one goes, we all go.” An ominous pile of human skulls lies to the left amid the rocky terrain, reminding us that we are always under the “threat of oblivion.” While the meaning of the composition is centered on outdated taboos around interracial relations, recent events in which nooses have been left by anonymous individuals to intimate African Americans demonstrate the persistence of prejudice and attempts at oppression and suppression in our society.

Hard Hats
1987
Acrylic on canvas
Milwaukee Art Museum, Gift of Judith and Howard Tullman, M 1998.79

This composition can be seen as an homage to the post war “construction worker” paintings by Colescott’s mentor Fernand Léger. It features a wife visiting her construction worker husband on site. She wears a pot on her head to mimic his own hard hat, and to the left is a vignette of a kitchen counter and sink with dishes, and a variety of construction workers, including a shirtless black man, a supervisor wearing a shirt and tie with a cigar. The scaffolding that creates horizontal/vertical framework in paintings such as Léger’s 1951 Builders with a Rope in the collection of Guggenheim Museum is mirrored in Hard Hats by the placement of the wooden beam hauled by the black worker and the planks of wood suspended from an unseen crane. Both mimic the horizontal and vertical alignment of the windowpanes. Colescott’s celebration of ordinary people in their pursuit of life, liberty and happiness—the American
corollary to ‘liberté, égalité, fraternité’—indicates how Léger and Colescott shared political perspectives.

*Beauty is Only Skin Deep*

1991
Acrylic on canvas
Collection of The University of Arizona Museum of Art, Tucson. Museum Purchase Funds provided by the Edward J. Gallagher, Jr. Memorial Fund

This painting demonstrates the virtuosity with which Colescott approached figuration and compositional organization in the 1990s. Here a spectral couple rendered in black with red accents seems to emerge from the pink cloud like an extra-terrestrial formation. Within the cloud, and below at the extreme left corner, there are Picasso-esque faces that face frontal with profile views in the same form. To the right is a brown face that resembles a tribal head, which covers itself with hands of a lighter hue. Crammed in between all this is a multi-colored topographical form of the African continent on the left, and a landscape of a brown path with greenery on the other side, leading to purple mountains and a section of blue sky in the distance.

*Alas, Jandava*

1998
Acrylic on canvas
Private collection, USA
Pick a Ninny Rose
1999
Acrylic on canvas
Albritton Collection

Sleeping Beauty?
2002
Acrylic on canvas
Courtesy of the Estate and Blum & Poe, Los Angeles/New York/Tokyo
RESOURCES

https://nyubrn.org/the-truisms-of-robert-colescott/

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Aesthetic Perspectives: Attributes of Excellence in Arts for Change
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