

**First Comprehensive Retrospective of Robert Colescott  
To Premiere at Contemporary Arts Center this September**

**Major Survey of Work by Pioneering and Provocative Artist  
Will Travel to Portland, Chicago, and Akron Following Cincinnati Presentation**



Robert Colescott, *George Washington Carver Crossing the Delaware: Page from an American History Textbook*, 1975, acrylic on canvas, 84 x 108 in. © Estate of Robert Colescott / Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York. Courtesy of the Estate and Blum & Poe, Los Angeles/New York/Tokyo

Cincinnati, OH—July 18, 2019—The first comprehensive retrospective of Robert Colescott, one of America’s most compelling and provocative artists, will open at the Contemporary Arts Center in Cincinnati on September 20, 2019. Bringing together 85 works spanning over 50 years of Colescott’s prolific career, *Art and Race Matters: The Career of Robert Colescott* explores the work of an artist who—through vibrant paintings laced with biting satire—confronted issues of race, gender, identity, and the uncomfortable realities of American life in the latter half of the 20th century.

Co-curated by Lowery Stokes Sims and Matthew Weseley, and organized by Raphaela Platow, the CAC’s Alice & Harris Weston Director and Chief Curator, *Art and Race Matters* will remain on view at the CAC through January 12, 2020. Following its debut in Cincinnati, the exhibition will travel to the Portland Art Museum, Portland, OR; the Chicago Cultural Center; and the Akron Art Museum, with additional venues to be announced at a future date.

*Art and Race Matters* will be the first complete survey of Colescott's work since his mid-career retrospective in 1987, which was hosted by the CAC, among other venues. It also builds upon the ten-year selection (1987-1996) that formed the artist's representation of the United States at the 1997 Venice Biennale, and a presentation of work from the following decade of his career (1997-2007) that was organized by Meridian Gallery in San Francisco in 2007. The exhibition will be accompanied by a major publication—the most comprehensive to date—published by Rizzoli Electa, which features stylistic analyses of his work; summaries of critical responses; interviews, reminiscences, and perspectives from family members, associates, and students; along with a selection of writings by the artist himself.

“Given the crisis of race relations, image management, and political manipulation in the current American—indeed the global—landscape,” noted Sims “Colescott's perspectives on race, life, social mores, historical heritage and cultural hybridity allow us a means—if we are up to the task—to forthrightly confront what the state of world culture will be in the next decade.”

Known for satirical figurative paintings that expose the ugly ironies of race in America, Robert Colescott (1925-2009) worked at the vanguard of the resurgence of figuration in art starting in the 1970s, which marked the emergence of post-modernist thought. He infused his works with narrative, humor, and cultural criticism long before it became common for artists to do so. Through his subversive appropriation of existing imagery from pop culture, mass media, and the art historical canon, Colescott reclaimed racist stereotypes and lampooned prevalent mythologies about blackness. This visually outspoken work therefore addresses issues of race and gender hierarchies, oppressive power structures, and societal taboos—with a biting satirical touch—exposing the absurdity of ideas that often go unchallenged.

*Art and Race Matters* invites a renewed examination of the artist, whose work is still as challenging, provocative, and relevant now as it was when he burst onto the art scene over five decades ago. Presenting works from across Colescott's career, the exhibition traces the progression of his stylistic development and the impact of place on his practice, revealing the diversity and range of his oeuvre: from his adaptations of Bay Area Figuration in the 1950s and 60s, to his signature graphic style of the 1970s, and the dense, painterly figuration of his later work. *Art and Race Matters* also explores prevalent themes in Colescott's work, including the complexities of identity, societal standards of beauty, the reality of the American Dream, and the role of the artist as arbiter and witness in contemporary life.

“Colescott's exploration of race, identity and politics is as pointed and pertinent now as ever and will help catalyze public discussion of pressing issues we are facing as a society,” said Platow. “In presenting the full-sweep of Colescott's career, our goal is to also assert his seminal contributions to both post-War American art and to contemporary artists today working in the US and internationally.”

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.

## Exhibition Tour

Following its premiere in Cincinnati from September 20, 2019 to January 12, 2020, *Art and Race Matters* will tour to:

- **Portland Art Museum**, Portland, OR (February 15–May 17, 2020)
- **Chicago Cultural Center**, Chicago, IL (June 20–September 27, 2020)
- **Akron Art Museum**, Akron, OH (October 25, 2020–January 31, 2021)

## Exhibition Catalogue

*Art and Race Matters: The Career of Robert Colescott* will be accompanied by a fully illustrated 252-page catalogue published by Rizzoli Electa. Featuring contributions by more than ten curators and writers, including Richard Powell, Joseph S. Lewis, Barry Blinderman and Mimi Roberts, along with a major essay by exhibition co-curator Lowery Sims Stokes and a selection of writings by the artist himself. The publication is the most comprehensive volume devoted to the life and work of Robert Colescott to date and includes important new research on the artist's chronology, exhibition history and bibliography by Matthew Weseley.

## About Robert Colescott (1925-2009)

Robert Colescott's paintings evoke powerful emotions and thoughtful contemplation—engaging themes of race, gender, and social inequality. His first major retrospective was organized in 1987 by the San Jose Museum of Art and subsequently traveled to the Contemporary Arts Center, among other venues. In 1997, Colescott was the first African American painter to have a solo exhibit at the Venice Biennale in Italy. His work is in the permanent collections of many museums, including the Museum of Modern Art, the Metropolitan Museum, the Seattle Art Museum, the Studio Museum in Harlem, and the Oakland Museum.

Colescott was born in 1925 in Oakland, California, where his father was as a waiter on a dining car on the Southern Pacific Railroad. The politics of race and social justice were woven into Colescott's everyday life and experience of this city. Colescott left Oakland to fight in the 86th Blackhawk Division during World War II. He returned to the Bay Area and enrolled at the University of California at Berkeley on the GI Bill, earning his B.A. in 1949. After receiving his degree, he spent a year in Paris at the Atelier Fernand Leger and then returned to Berkeley, earning an M.A. in 1951.

In 1964, Colescott spent a year as Faculty Artist in Residence at the American Research Center in Cairo, prompting a period of transformation as his work grew more graphic and explicitly political. Colescott received international recognition for his satirical re-envisioning of American history in paintings like *George Washington Carver Crossing the Delaware* (1975). Later work brought together personal, political, and societal issues. Paintings such as *The Other Washingtons* (1987), *Arabs: The Emir of Iswid (How Wide the Gulf?)* of 1992, *Choctow Nickel* (1994), and *The Bi-lingual Cop* (1995) demonstrate Colescott's perceptive and prescient view of world events.

## About the Curators

**Lowery Stokes Sims** is an independent art historian and curator who was a close associate of Colescott and wrote about and exhibited his work for over forty years. She retired as Curator Emerita from the Museum of Arts and Design in New York where she served as the Charles Bronfman International

Curator and the William and Mildred Ladson Chief Curator from 2007 to 2015. Prior to her tenure at MAD, Sims served as Executive Director, President, and Adjunct Curator for the permanent collection at the Studio Museum in Harlem from 2000 to 2007. Previously, she served on the education and curatorial staff of the Metropolitan Museum of Art from 1972 to 1999 where she curated over thirty exhibitions.

A specialist in modern and contemporary art, craft, and design, Sims is known for her particular interest in a diverse and inclusive global art world and has supported a variety of artists whose identities and work reflect those values.

**Matthew Weseley** is an independent art historian. He earned a bachelor's degree in art history from Stanford University, a master's degree in education from Smith College, and a master's degree in art history from the University of California, Davis. He is currently working on an academic monograph on the work of Robert Colescott.

### **About the Contemporary Arts Center (CAC)**

Through exhibitions, performances, and educational and hands-on community programs, the Contemporary Arts Center (CAC) provides opportunities for all people to engage with the art, artists, and ideas of our time. Working with its community of visitors, patrons, and partners, the CAC explores the unfolding landscape of art and celebrates creative expression in everyone.

Since its founding in 1939, the CAC has been a champion of emerging ideas in contemporary art, hosting one of the first Midwest exhibitions of Picasso's *Guernica* in 1939; mounting an early exhibition of Pop Art in 1963; representing the United States at the São Paulo Biennial in 1975; and presenting—and successfully defending—the 1990 Mapplethorpe retrospective that became a lightning rod in the era's culture wars and propelled the CAC into the national spotlight.

In 2003, the CAC moved into the Lois & Richard Rosenthal Center for Contemporary Art, the first museum designed by architect Zaha Hadid and the first museum in the US to be designed by a woman. Recent programming highlights include landmark exhibitions of work by Ugo Rondinone, Do Ho Suh, Titus Kaphar, Saya Woolfalk, Swoon, and Akram Zaatari, and the first solo museum presentations of artists such as Maria Lassnig, Shilpa Gupta, JR, Anri Sala, Michael Sailstorfer, Pia Camil, Albano Afonso, and Pamela Phatsimo Sunstrom. The CAC also launched an ongoing performance program in 2011, which is now accompanied by the This Time Tomorrow annual performance festival. Artists presented include Okwui Okpokwasili, Taylor Mac, Kaneza Schaal, and Tanya Tagaq, with North American premieres from international artists such as Kate McIntosh, Ingrid Fiksdal, Mithkal Alzghair, and Raquel André.

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