

My presentation today is on African American artists of the visual arts and the manner in which they portray the subject of religion in their art.

When I became interested in African American art in the mid-1990s, I was constantly directed to the Harlem Renaissance by everyday people as well as scholars. I wondered: "Is this all there is?", "Where is the art of other eras?" Well, over a decade later, I can assure you that there is documented art by African American artists since the eighteenth century. Today, I would like to show the works of a few of these artists, I believe that they are all interesting, non-stereotypical works of art.

William Majors was born in Indianapolis, Indiana in 1930. He was a painter, printmaker, and educator. His "Crucifixion, 1958" (see Fig. 1) is one of many Majors created after being confined for seven years in a Sanitarium for tuberculosis. He preferred to use symbolism to evoke his themes, and he has positioned three ladders, a symbol of the crucifixion in art, prominently in the left foreground to signify their significance. They represent Jesus and the two thieves who were crucified with him. A foot in the upper right center of the canvas stands for the figure of Christ, while a ray of light breaking through the picture plane implies the presence of God.

Beauford Delaney was born in Knoxville, Tennessee in 1910. He was a painter and was well known for his pastel portraits. The biblical reference for his "The Burning Bush, 1941," (see Fig. 2) is found in Exodus 4:10-16, "The Angel of the Lord appeared to Moses in flames of fire from within a bush. Moses saw that though the bush was on fire it did not burn up" (Barker 93).

Delaney was also interested in total abstraction and created a large body of works in this style. In this abstract composition he uses an impasto technique, paint applied in heavy layers or strokes, structured with heavy outlining to create a more stylized portrayal in which the individual flames peak at the top of the composition drawing the viewer's eye upward to heaven above.

Henry Ossawa Tanner was born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania in 1859. He was a painter, illustrator, photographer, and educator. His most well-known work is "The Banjo Lesson," that depicts an elderly black man teaching a boy how to play the banjo, but he left a huge body of work on religion that is breathtakingly beautiful. Tanner used religion to express his faith. He sometimes said, "I will preach with my brush." (Bearden and Henderson 91). His work is best classified under the heading of Realism, depicting scenes as they appear in nature, not idealized, which was exceptional at the time.

The biblical reference for this work, "The Raising of Lazarus, 1896) (see Fig. 3) is found in John 11, in which Jesus raised a man from the dead to prove that he was sent by God (Barker 1652-1653). The first thing we notice is that although he included a black man in the crowd, the central figures are not depicted as African American, and therefore his religious works are sometimes overlooked by those looking for African American art. All of his works on religion have a unique use of light. The blazing yellow light bathes the body of Lazarus in the foreground and encompasses the figures of Christ, the disciples, and the other figures at the scene. "For some African Americans it symbolized the raising of African Americans from slavery through faith" (Bearden and Hender vi). The subject of religion has been one constant in the works of African American artists of the visual arts, but unfortunately these works are not always the most well-known. If your reference for African American visual art has been the Harlem Renaissance, I hope these works compel you to look a little further. There is an overwhelming amount of historical art in art galleries and museums all over the country, and there is a thriving art community in Detroit that would love your interest.



Fig. 1. William Majors. Crucifixion.
Oil on canvas, 41 x 30", c. 1958.
Collection of Wendell L. Parker.

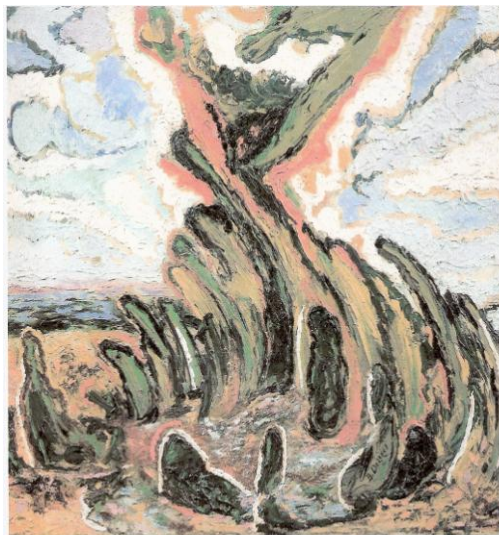


Fig. 2. Beauford Delaney. The Burning Bush.
Oil on paperboard, 19 7/8 x 24 1/8", 1941.
The Newark Museum of Newark, NJ.

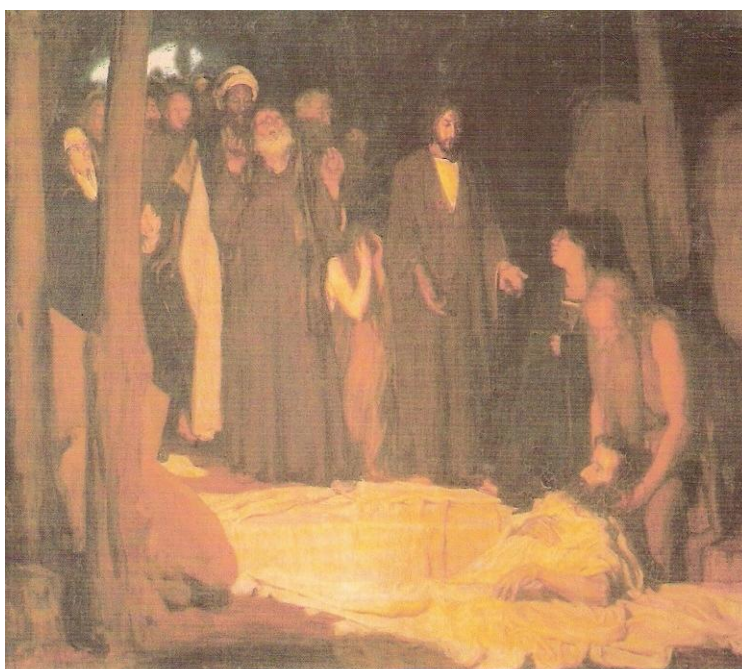


Fig. 3. Henry Ossawa Tanner. The Raising of Lazarus.
37 3/8 x 47 13/16", 1896.
Musée National d'Art Moderne, Compiègne.

WORKS CITED

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