



Smithsonian Institution

National Museum of African American History and Culture

Abbott's Monthly Vol. II No. 5

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SONG OF THE PLOWMAN

By MILDRED D. BARRY

I sing as I plow between my trees
On a cloudless sunflecked morn,
I sing as I breathe the breath of spring
By the vagrant breezes born.

Fruit petals fall in a fragrant shower,
I hear mating blackbirds call,
A robin swings in a blossomed bower
From the tops of the branches tall.

The fresh turned earth has a rare perfume
Far richer than jessamine,
The hum of the bees and the linnet's song
Is more sweet than an opera theme.

I sing as I work and I raise my voice
To be heard by Him above,
For my happiness is the sweet content
Of the man who works for love.

painting to E. M. Bannister, and in sculpture to Meta Warrick Fuller, both of whom received their recognitions chiefly in Europe, and both are now recognized as the best produced by the race.

Unlike the other artists of our group, the painters and sculptors have not as yet received a very large public appreciation. Our musicians and composers especially have always received a large share of public attention, and in recent years, our poets and literary men, but the painters and sculptors are sadly neglected. Unfortunately that branch of our fine arts is not so widely known.

Within our race is a vast unlimited field of material for the artist. With the large amount of beautiful colors ranging from the darkest to the lightest, it is the duty of the artist to depict this beauty. One has only to visit the large cities where a large number of our people congregate, there he finds color in its abundance. With this vast array of color, one detests the many advertisements in papers for preparations to whiten our skins.

The increasing popularity for black subjects in painting and sculpture is noted in the large annual exhibitions throughout the country; mostly done by white artists. Time was, if the white did use the black man for subject in art, it would either be a caricature or picturing him as a servant. He is now becoming more and more a subject for art.

Though the days of slavery and many who lived in those days have long since passed, the art of the slaves is still very evident and effective. Their songs and music were very befitting to them and to the conditions under which they lived. Melodious, harmonious, beautiful, their art came from the depths of their souls, sounding an undertone of patient sadness, and when sung today, one cannot help but have a feeling of



sympathy for those people; and today those songs are considered the only original music that has sprung from American soil, a great contribution to American music.

As far back as 1910 our students began to appear in the art schools of the country, and since then there has been an increasing number, and especially in the Art Institute of Chicago. The Chicago Art Institute school and galleries have an open door to all races; unlike the South where such is closed to black people.

From time to time our artists have appeared singly in different exhibitions throughout the country and a few have made good, winning prizes, awards, honorable mentions, etc. But it was not until the Harmon Foundation and the Federated Council of Churches began in 1926 to present annually works of black artists from all parts of the country that America then, for the first time, learned that she had a number of black contributors to the art world that were never heard of before. Previous to that time, however, various art clubs and societies in several of our larger cities, were holding exhibitions of the works of as many of the Negro painters as could be gathered together, but mostly local.

Chief among these societies, the Tanner Art League of Washington, D. C., the Round-Table Art Colony of Albany, N. Y., and the Art League of Chicago. The Crisis Magazine offering the Krigwa prizes, and Opportunity's annual prizes, the Guggenheim Fellowship and the Rosenwald Fund have all done much to encourage the Negro artist and his art. The Art League of Chicago is the first practical organization whose members are active in many directions. It is established on a practical basis.

TO many of us a black man as an artist is something new, but we should bear in mind that the conscious Negro artist is not new. What is new is the evaluation and a larger public recognition of his art. Since it is true that the Negro is not new; the history is, nevertheless, new.

Many are prone to believe that his art does not compare favorably with the arts of the world while others believe that he might have something new to offer. Proof of this fact is that a few years ago some of our white friends would feel somewhat embarrassed to know that they owned a work by a black painter now they are proud to own a work by him. Time will bring out the finer qualities of their work.

Some have said that the work of the present day Negro artist is but an imitation of that of the white artist. Such a statement we consider absolutely untrue. There might be some resemblance, when we stop to consider that all his teaching so far has been from schools in which his instructors are white, and being so long dominated by white influence has to some extent discouraged or destroyed the very spark of original Negro art.

MANY have a mistaken idea that art expression is confined to a particular group of society, while the truth is that nearly all great artists have arisen from the people. All races, black, brown and yellow, have produced great masters.

The Negro artist like the musician has something peculiarly his own, though ancient traditions have been decidedly more interrupted in art

than in music. That child-like spirit which the ancient black man possessed when he carved those weird and grotesque forms that many a modernist has sought artificially to revive, has not been entirely refined away by the process of civilization in the black man of today. There is no telling what

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that spirit, expressing itself naturally, might accomplish.

As has always been the case with other artists in the past, the lives and struggles of many of our present day artists is very interesting. Very likely their struggles have been more difficult than others, namely, that of poor circumstances, together with handicaps of race which are many. The experiences of a fellow artist is interesting. He was working in a dealer's gallery and was very much liked by his employer, who, at times, had his paintings on view. At one time a dealer from New York came in the galleries, and upon seeing one of my friend's paintings remarked: "Where did you get the new Murphy?" It was hard to convince him otherwise.

THE next experience was a bit more embarrassing. At another time, a woman patron and lover of art came in the galleries, and upon seeing one of my friend's paintings said: "What a lovely Innes! I must have it." But upon learning that a black man painted it, her enthusiasm for the picture died. She wouldn't have it at any price. However, we are glad to note a great change of opinion, brought on by our own people, who, at times, purchase works by their artists, and by the individual artist himself, gradually pushing to the front.

A very peculiar case of one painter is that of Jesse Ford of Washington, D.C., who has endured many hardships and disappointments in his life. The loss of a wife and child, unable at times to provide adequately for his family; discouraged by a step-father who thought his efforts useless were some of his obstacles. He gets his pictures in a very unusual way. He sees them on a brick wall during a rain storm. He says a kind of veil seems to envelope him, and a feeling that he cannot explain comes upon him, and he must go home immediately and paint the picture that is visioned on the wall. His paintings have attracted much attention.

While poets, musicians and composers of our race are eminent in America, producers in the graphic arts are not numerous, which is due directly to the lack of training. Their artistic is naturally light-hearted and spontaneous. The graphic and plastic arts have lagged because there is no background of memories of art galleries, pictures and masters, however, the one master, H.O. Tanner, is represented in various museums in this country and in Europe, and inspiration for the younger artist.

ONE of the greatest problems that confronts our painters is a place to market his pictures. Since there are not yet so many picture buyers in our race it would be well for them to organize into societies and keep their productions ever before the public, and to educate the race to the love and appreciation of the finer arts, to encourage artistic expression in the graphic and applied arts, and to find a market for their productions among people everywhere.

There has, however, been much interest manifested in our artists in recent years. All over the country in the principal cities are held

exhibitions of their works. Aside from the annual exhibits sponsored by the Harmon Foundation, William E. Scott in recent years has been responsible for many exhibitions held in the larger cities of California and other cities on the West Coast. These exhibits have received much praise from local critics.

A great deal of enthusiasm for the black artist is shown in Indianapolis, Indiana. There a painting by John Hardick has been purchased and presented to the John Herron Art Museum in their permanent collection. This was done by the colored people of the city. Another incident of that kind happened in San Diego, California. Our race presented to the art galleries there "Ester," a terra cotta head of a black girl, the prized work of Sargeant Johnson of Berkeley. It must be remembered that Mr. Johnson received the Harmon special prize for his "Sammy" in 1928.

In receiving the gift, Julius Wagenheim lauded the achievements of the Negro in art. He urged our artists to remain original and not to copy arts of other races. The writer believes our artists have always been original, even in our earliest work in sculpture, painting, music and song.

WHAT is greatly needed, and what would be of great benefit

[[image]]

[[caption]] SWING LOW SWEET CHARIOT by Malvin Gray Johnson of New York which won the Otto Kahn prize in the Harmon Exhibit.

[[/caption]]

[[image]]

[[caption]] ESTER, a terra cotta head of an African girl, the prized work of Sargeant Johnson of Berkeley, California. [[/caption]]

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