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Celebrating 175: Charles White Files, Burroughs, Margaret and DuSable Museum, 1971-1979

Extracted on Mar-28-2024 05:59:05

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Margaret Burroughs: Images of Dignity

Margaret Taylor Goss Burroughs is a native of St. Rose Parish, Louisiana. She received the Bachelor of Art Education and Master of Art Education degrees from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Additionally, she has studied at Northwestern and Columbia Universities and the Taller de Grafica Popular in Mexico City.

Mrs. Burroughs has exhibited widely in this country and in Denmark, Poland, East Germany, and the Soviet Union. In 1955, she won first place purchase award for her watercolor, Ribbon Man, Mexico City Market, in the Annual Exhibition of Paintings, Prints and Sculpture by Negro Artists at Atlanta University. Her print, Mahomet's Children, won "Best of Show" award at the Lincoln University (Missouri) National Conference of Artists Exhibition in 1967.

As a children's author, she has written two books and has edited two anthologies. She has published several articles in scholarly journals on various aspects of the black experience in America.

Mrs. Burroughs is currently Director of the DuSable Museum of African-American History, which she founded, and professor of humanities at Kennedy-King College. She organized the National Conference of Artists and collaborated with other artists and civic-minded citizens in the organization of the South Side Community Art Center. Her travels have taken her to Africa, Eastern Europe, the U.S.S.R., as well as to most countries in this hemisphere. Her work is widely held, in both private and public collections.

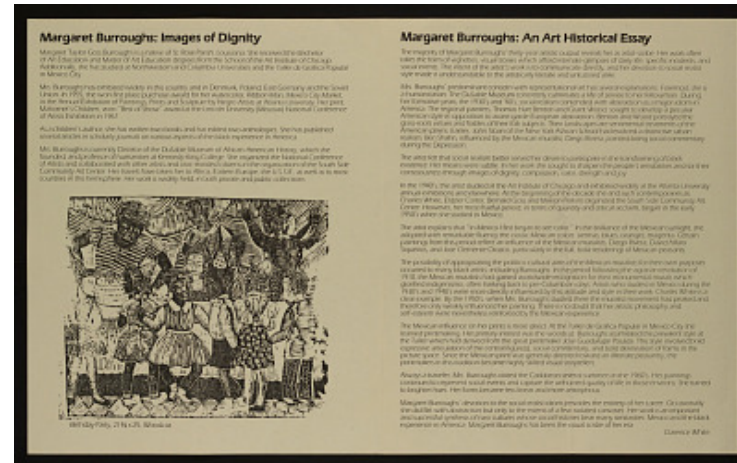
[image - woodcut]
Birthday Party, 21 1/2 x 25, Woodcut

Margaret Burroughs: An Art Historical Essay

The majority of Margaret Burroughs' thirty-year artistic output reveals her as artist-scribe. Her work often takes the form of vignettes, visual stories which afford intimate glimpses of daily life, specific incidents, and social events. The intent of the artist's work is to communicate directly, and her devotion to social realist style made it understandable to the artistically literate and untutored alike.

Mrs. Burroughs' predominant concern with representational art has several expectations. Foremost, she is a humanitarian. The DuSable Museum concretely culminates a life of service to her fellowman. During her formative years, the 1930's and 40's, social realism contended with abstraction as a major idiom in America. The regional painters, Thomas Hart Benton and Giant Wood, sought to develop a peculiar American style in opposition to avant-garde European abstraction. Benton and Wood portrayed the grass-roots virtues and foibles of their folk subjects. Their landscapes are sentimental treatments of the American plains. Earlier, John Sloan of the New York Ashcan School had evolved a distinctive urban realism. Ben Shahn, influenced by the Mexican muralist, Diego Rivera, painted biting social commentary during the Depression.

The artist felt that social realism better served her desire to participate in the transforming of black existence. Her means were subtle. In her



work she sought to sharpen the people's sensibilities and stir their consciousness through images of dignity, compassion, valor, strength and joy.

In the 1940's, the artist studied at the Art Institute of Chicago and exhibited widely at the Atlanta University annual exhibitions and elsewhere. At the beginning of the decade she and such contemporaries as Charles White, Eldzier Cortor, Bernard Goss and Marion Perkins organized the South Side Community Art Center. However, her most fruitful period, in terms of quantity and critical acclaim, began in the early 1950's when she studied in Mexico.

The artist explains that "in Mexico I first began to see color." In the brilliance of the Mexican sunlight, she adopted with remarkable fluency the classic Mexican colors: siennas, blues, oranges, magenta. Certain paintings from this period reflect an influence of the Mexican muralists, Diego Rivera, David Alfaro Siqueiros, and Jose Clemente Orozco, particularly in the full, bold renderings of Mexican peasants.

The possibility of appropriating the politico-cultural aims of the Mexican muralists for their own purposes occurred to many black artists, including Burroughs. In the period following the agrarian revolution of 1910, the Mexican muralists had gained worldwide recognition for their monumental murals which glorified indigenismo, often harking back to pre-Columbian days. Artists who studied in Mexico during the 1930's and 1940's were more directly influenced by this attitude and style in their work. Charles White is a clear example. By the 1950's, when Mrs. Burroughs studied there the muralist movement had peaked and therefore only weakly influenced her painting. There is no doubt that her artistic philosophy and self-esteem were nevertheless reinforced by the Mexican experience.

The Mexican influence on her prints is more direct. At the Taller de Grafica Popular in Mexico City she learned printmaking. Her primary interest was the woodcut. Burroughs assimilated the prevalent style at the Taller which had derived from the great printmaker Jose Guadalupe Posada. This style involved bold expressive articulation of the central figure(s), social commentary, and bold delineation of forms in the picture space. Since the Mexican print was generally [[generally]] directed towards an illiterate peasantry, the printmakers in this tradition became highly skilled visual storytellers.

Always a traveler, Mrs. Burroughs visited the Caribbean several summers in the 1960's. Her paintings continued to represent social events and capture the unhurried quality of life in those environs. She turned to brighter hues. Her forms became less linear and more amorphous.

Margaret Burroughs' devotion to the social realist idiom pervades the entirety of her career. Occasionally she did flirt with abstraction but only to the extent of a few isolated canvases. Her work is an important and successful synthesis of two cultures whose social histories bear many similarities: Mexico and the black experience in America. Margaret Burroughs has been the visual scribe of her era.

Clarence White

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