



Aaron Douglas, *Into Bondage*, 1936

CORCORAN GALLERY OF ART

# Aaron Douglas (born Topeka, KS, 1899–died Nashville, TN, 1979)

## *Into Bondage*, 1936

Oil on canvas, 60 3/8 x 60 1/2 in. (153.4 x 153.7 cm)

Signed lower right: AARON DOUGLAS

Museum Purchase and partial gift from Thurlow Evans Tibbs, Jr., The Evans-Tibbs Collection, 1996

### ABOUT THE ARTIST

Aaron Douglas, a major figure of the **Harlem Renaissance**, was one of the first African American artists to draw on contemporary black culture as subject matter for his work. Born in Topeka, Kansas in 1899, Douglas recognized his artistic ambition early. He attended the University of Nebraska where he was the only African American student pursuing art. After teaching high school art classes in Kansas City, Missouri, Douglas relocated and immersed himself in the New York City art world. Douglas' first commission was to illustrate Alain Locke's 1925 compilation of contemporary African American prose, *The New Negro*. The success of this project and others established Douglas as a leading artist in the rapidly developing Harlem Renaissance movement. Poet and writer Langston Hughes encouraged other African American artists to aspire to Douglas' example and to convey their "individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame."

Douglas continued to create inspiring images for African Americans through several series of murals depicting black history. In 1935, Douglas formed the Harlem Artists Guild "to band all the Harlem artists together in a cultural group" and to lobby for African American artists to gain employment under the federal **Works Progress Administration**. Douglas left New York in 1937 to establish the art department at Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee, where he remained active until 1976. An inspirational educator, Douglas influenced generations of African American artists.

### SUGGESTED DIALOGUE

- If you had not studied history and the enslavement of Africans, could you still interpret the narrative of this work?
- How do you know the people are to become slaves?
- How is the composition affected by the **concentric** circles?
- The painting is composed of flat planes with visible brushstrokes and no shading. How does the artist achieve depth?

### EXTENDED DIALOGUE

- What do think the gesture of the women on the left signifies? Does it indicate hope or despair?
- Why do you think Douglas chose not to depict this scene in a naturalistic manner? How does his style alter the meaning or your impression of the work?
- Look at the star and its ray of light shining in the middle of the canvas. Why do you think Douglas included the star? How would the mood change if the star was removed? What other symbols could the artist have included to give a sense of hope to the narrative?
- This painting was originally part of a four-painting series. If you had three more canvases to complete the series, what scenes from African American history would you choose to convey?

### ABOUT THE ART

*Into Bondage* premiered as one element of a four-part mural series in the Hall of Negro Life at the 1936 Texas Centennial Exposition in Dallas. It was Douglas' intention to create and present fresh, modern images depicting the contributions of African Americans to the state's history and achievements. This painting portrays slavery, as Douglas believed that understanding the past was essential to moving forward in the future. *Aspiration*—the only other surviving mural from the series, which is in the collection of the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco—depicts Douglas' 20th century contemporaries as an educated urban class. Many white fairgoers at the Exposition refused to believe that the highly accomplished artist who painted these works was African American.

*Into Bondage* exemplifies Douglas' unique compositional style which includes radiating circles, silhouetted forms with few interior details, and **Cubist**-influenced overlapping shapes. The reddish-orange color of the manacles and star contrasts the **analogous** palette of misty blues, mauves, and lavenders. The bound captives descend toward two large ships that are set to transport the Africans across the Atlantic to their future of enslavement. While most of the men's heads are bowed low in despair, the woman on the left looks up and raises her shackled hands above the horizon line. The large central figure's eye slit recalls the masks of the **Dan** people of Africa. His profiled head and chest and twist of the hips demonstrate Douglas' predilection for ancient Egyptian art. Although the man stands on a pedestal referencing the auction block from which he will be sold, a ray of light from the **North Star**, which guided slaves on the **Underground Railroad**, illuminates his face and foreshadows his ultimate freedom.

### VOCABULARY

**Harlem Renaissance:** The period between 1919 and the early 1930s of burgeoning African American culture, which included visual art, theater, prose, and poetry, and was centered in the Harlem neighborhood of New York City. These African American intellectuals believed that increasing awareness of black culture through various art forms would reduce racial tensions and barriers in 20th century America.

**Works Progress Administration:** A federal government agency established in 1935 to provide work opportunities to those suffering in the Depression. The administration also set up the Federal Writer's Project and the Federal Arts Project to make jobs available to unemployed arts professionals.

**Cubism:** An artistic movement of the early 20th century led by artists Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque. Cubism abandoned the traditional fixed viewpoint, and instead explored a multiplicity of viewpoints to develop an accumulated idea of the subject resembling abstract, geometric forms.

**Analogous colors:** Two or three colors which are adjacent to each other on the color wheel. (i.e. orange, orange-red, red)

**Dan:** Ethnic group located in the West African countries of Liberia and Côte d'Ivoire.

**North Star:** Runaway slaves on the Underground Railroad mostly moved at night to avoid being caught in the daylight. They used this bright beacon as a navigational device to find their way north, their intended direction towards freedom.

**Underground Railroad:** A network of both black and white people who aided runaway slaves along their journey to freedom in the North. Fugitives would find shelter and food at these homes or establishments until it was safe to continue traveling and would then move at night in 10 to 20 mile increments.

**Concentric:** Objects or shapes that share a common center.

Support for Arts 101 materials is made possible in part by the Women's Committee of the Corcoran and the DC Commission on the Arts and Humanities.

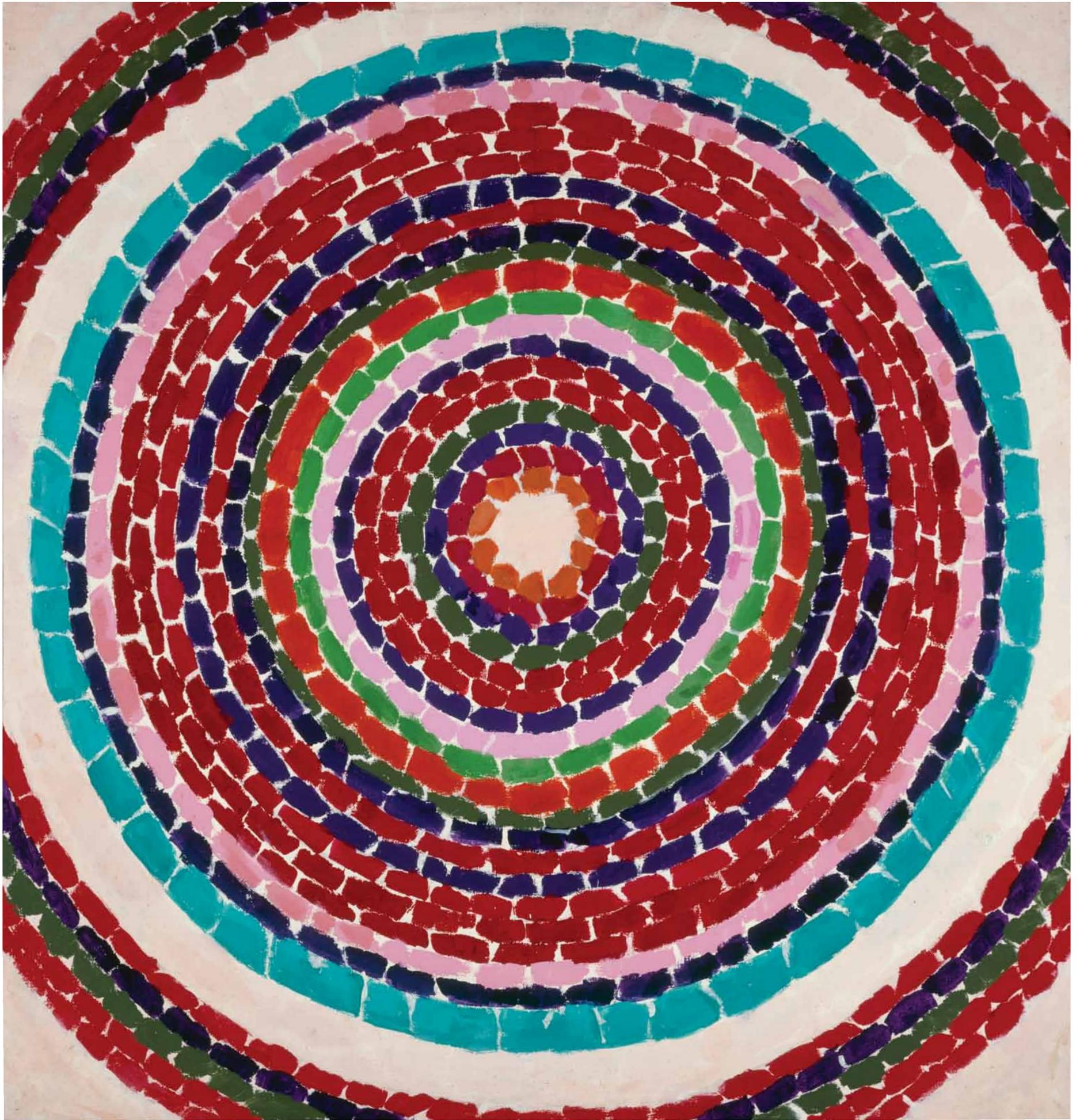
## ENDNOTES

Jennifer Wingate, "Aaron Douglas, *Into Bondage*" in *Corcoran Gallery of Art: American Paintings to 1945*, ed. Sarah Cash, et al, (Washington, D.C.: Corcoran Gallery of Art in association with Hudson Hills Press, 2011), 246-247.

Susan Badder, "Into Bondage" in *A Capital Collection: Masterworks from the Corcoran Gallery of Art*, ed. Amy Pastan (Lingfield, Surrey: Third Millennium Publishing Limited, 2002), 200-201.

Susan Badder et al, "Aaron Douglas" in *Corcoran Gallery of Art African-American Art Educators' Resource Pack* (Washington, D.C.: Corcoran Gallery of Art Education Department, 1999), unpaginated.

Renee Ater, "Creating a 'Usable Past' and a 'Future Perfect Society'" in *Aaron Douglas: African American Modernist*, ed. Susan Earle (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 95-112.



Alma Thomas, *Pansies in Washington*, 1969

CORCORAN GALLERY OF ART

# Alma Thomas (born Columbus, GA, 1891–died Washington, D.C., 1978)

## *Pansies in Washington, 1969*

Acrylic on canvas, 50 x 48 in. (127 x 121.92 cm)

Gift of Vincent Melzac, 1972

© Estate of Alma Thomas

### ABOUT THE ARTIST

Alma Thomas, a devoted teacher, gifted artist, and dedicated political activist, was born in 1891 in Columbus, Georgia. Her family moved to Washington, D.C. in the early 1900s because the city offered better educational and employment opportunities for African Americans. After receiving a teacher's certificate, Thomas continued her studies at Howard University, eventually becoming the first graduate of the Art Department in 1924. She dedicated herself to educating the youth of D.C., teaching art for 35 years at Shaw Junior High School.

In 1943 Thomas served as the vice president of the **Barnett Aden Gallery**, the first private gallery in D.C. to exhibit work by artists of all races. Through this association, Thomas came in contact with a variety of modern art styles—from **Realism** to **Abstract Expressionism**. By 1954, Thomas' paintings had shifted from a realistic style to an abstract one which emphasized color and shape. Her new work received critical attention in the mid-1960s, and in 1972, at the age of 80, she had a solo show at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York (she was the first African American woman to do so) and a retrospective at the Corcoran Gallery of Art.

### SUGGESTED DIALOGUE

- What do these concentric circles suggest to you? Note that some of the outermost circles seem to continue outside the canvas. How would the painting change if all the circles were contained within the picture plane?
- What colors did Thomas use to create this painting? Do the colors remind you of pansies?
- What else might the circles of color represent?
- Imagine that the artist's point of view had been in the garden rather than above it. How would that change the image?
- In what area of the painting are the largest blocks of color? The smallest ones? How would the composition change if all were the same size?

### EXTENDED DIALOGUE

- If you were painting subjects from nature in your neighborhood or other areas of D.C., what would you select? Would you choose to paint in a realistic or abstract style?
- Alma Thomas was inspired by nature, especially that of her neighborhood and other parts of the city. What inspires you?

### ABOUT THE ART

Thomas met many D.C. painters, including those who were part of the **Washington Color School**. She was affected by these artists who were primarily interested in "pure, flat color, reduced to simple forms." However, Thomas' work differed from theirs in several significant ways, including her handling of pigment, use of primed canvas, and subject matter. Thomas was strongly influenced by colors in nature, especially those found in the flowers and greenery of her garden and other areas of D.C.

*Pansies in Washington* is part of Thomas' "Earth Paintings" series, which was inspired by aerial views of D.C.'s areas of natural beauty such as the Arboretum's flower beds and the Tidal Basin's cherry blossoms. To create this work, Thomas first primed the canvas, then used pen to draw each rectangle onto the canvas, and finally painted small, irregular blocks of red, blue, pink, green, orange, purple, and yellow in **concentric** circles to suggest a large bed of pansies. The brushstrokes draw attention to the surface of the canvas as they appear to hover in front of the neutral background. The irregular, thickly applied daubs of color evoke the flickering of light and shade as well as the motion of the flowers in the wind.

### VOCABULARY

**Barnett Aden Gallery:** The Barnett Aden Gallery (1943–69), one of Washington, D.C.'s principal art galleries during its time, was the first privately owned African American gallery in the United States, and one of the few art spaces in the city where artists representing different nationalities, races, and ethnicities were exhibited together. Noted for its afternoon openings, the Barnett Aden Gallery was an important social gathering place.

**Realism:** The general attempt in the visual arts to depict subjects in accordance with their actual appearance.

**Abstract Expressionism:** The movement in American painting, centered mainly in New York, that flourished in the 1940s and 1950s. Styles ranged from spontaneous, gestural compositions that paid attention to the qualities of the painting materials and stood as records of the painting process, to contemplative, near monochromatic works featuring large areas of color.

**Washington Color School:** A loosely affiliated group of color field artists centered in Washington D.C. who, from the mid-1950s, explored geometric formality and the expressive qualities of color—often in large-scale paintings.

**Concentric:** Objects or shapes that share a common center.

## ENDNOTES

Susan Badder et al, "Alma Thomas" in *Corcoran Gallery of Art African-American Art Educators' Resource Pack* (Washington, D.C.: Corcoran Gallery of Art Education Department, 1999), unpaginated.

"Alma Thomas," The National Museum of Women in the Arts. Web: <http://www.nmwa.org>.



# Charles Bird King (born Newport, RI, 1785–died Washington, D.C., 1862)

## *Poor Artist's Cupboard*, c. 1815

Oil on panel, 29 13/16 x 27 13/16 in. (75.7 x 70.7 cm)

Museum Purchase, Gallery Fund and Exchange, 1955

### ABOUT THE ARTIST

Born in Newport, Rhode Island, Charles Bird King began his formal art training in New York with portraitist Edward Savage. He later moved to London, where he lived for seven years, to continue studying with painter **Benjamin West**. He returned to the U.S. to live and work in Philadelphia, but had a lackluster career, selling only two **portraits** during his four years there. King settled in Washington D.C. in 1818, where he achieved great success as a painter of society and diplomatic portraits. In addition, he ran a for-profit gallery in his home on Twelfth Street where he exhibited his own paintings. King's portraits of **Henry Clay** and **John C. Calhoun**, both commissioned while King resided in D.C., are in the Corcoran's collection. Although he was from a family of means and apparently never had to support himself through the sales of his works, at times King chose to live in self-imposed privation; as a student in London, he and portraitist Thomas Sully shared a small, one-room apartment and subsisted on bread, milk, and potatoes in order to stretch their budgets. King is best known for his paintings of Native American delegates to the nation's capital, making him one of the first portraitists of Western tribal leaders. Unfortunately, many of these works were destroyed in an 1865 fire at the Smithsonian Institution.

### ABOUT THE ART

Although King based *Poor Artist's Cupboard* on personal experience, he was not by any means a “starving artist.” The **still life** painting has been understood by art historians to be a meditation on the impoverishment of cultural life—especially that of Philadelphia—as symbolized by the tattered books and papers. Through the various objects in the **niche**, King introduces his audience to the sad story of fictional artist, C. Palette. Drafting tools are at the center, flanked by a crust of bread—perched, ironically, on a richly bound art history tome—and a humble glass of water. Just below are two calling cards, each addressed to Mr. Palette. One, from a miserly patron, Mrs. Skinflint, requests that he visit her after tea, and a second asks Palette to repay a debt of five dollars that he owes to a “lover of the arts.” Above, two thin volumes bear handwritten titles which were traditional proverbs about poverty: “We Fly by Night” and “No Song, no Supper.” On top of them lies a stack of unpaid bills. Surrounding these objects is a host of books with rather gloomy titles: *The Miseries of Life*, *The Advantages of Poverty – Part III*, and Cheyne's *Vegetable Diet*. At the upper left of this tableau is an advertisement for a Sheriff's Sale listing the “property of an artist,” a few articles of clothing, a peck of potatoes, and several still lifes of rich repasts painted “from recollection.”

King's **trompe l'oeil** panel is also reminiscent of Dutch still life paintings in the tradition of **vanitas**, which are contemplations on the fleeting pleasures of life. Indeed the tattered books, as well as the cylinder of papers—which one art historian has observed when viewed obliquely resembles a skull—suggest decay and death.

### SUGGESTED DIALOGUE

- How do we know that fictional artist C. Palette is poor? Are King's visual clues easily translated by 21st-century audiences?
- If you were to construct a still life about a contemporary struggling artist, what objects would you include? What would you name the fictional artist?
- Do you think King is sympathetic with Palette's circumstances? Note the beaver top hat on the right; do you think that would be an item that an artist of little means would typically possess?

### EXTENDED DIALOGUE

- If you created an “identity niche” to describe yourself, what would you include? Would your family and friends be able to recognize you from the items in your niche?

### VOCABULARY

**Benjamin West** (1738-1820): An Anglo-American Neoclassical painter of historical scenes and portraits during and after the time of the Revolutionary War.

**Henry Clay** (1777-1852): A 19th-century American statesman and orator who represented Kentucky in both the Senate and the House of Representatives, where he served as Speaker. He also served as Secretary of State from 1825 to 1829.

**John C. Calhoun** (1782-1850): The seventh Vice President of the United States and a leading Southern politician from South Carolina during the first half of the 19th century.

**Portrait:** A portrait is a painting, photograph, sculpture, or other artistic representation of a person, in which the face and its expression is predominant. The intent is to display the likeness, personality, and even the mood of the person.

**Still life:** An arrangement or work of art showing a collection or grouping of inanimate objects.

**Vanitas:** The word is Latin, meaning “emptiness.” A type of symbolic work of art especially associated with Northern European still life painting in the 16th and 17th centuries.

**Trompe l'oeil:** *Trompe l'oeil* is French for “deceive the eye.” This term is used to describe pictures in which a deliberate visual illusion is intended by the artist.

**Niche:** A niche is an architectural recess in a wall or the like, usually semicircular in plan and arched, as for a statue or other decorative object.

## ENDNOTES

Lisa Strong, "Charles Bird King, *Poor Artist's Cupboard*" in *Corcoran Gallery of Art: American Paintings to 1945*, ed. Sarah Cash, et al, (Washington, D.C.: Corcoran Gallery of Art in association with Hudson Hills Press, 2011), 152-153.

Linda Crocker Simons, "*Poor Artist's Cupboard*" in *A Capital Collection: Masterworks from the Corcoran Gallery of Art*, ed. Amy Pastan (Lingfield, Surrey: Third Millennium Publishing Limited, 2002), 100-101.



Joshua Johnson, *Grace Allison McCurdy (Mrs. Hugh McCurdy) and Her Daughters, Mary Jane and Letitia Grace*, c. 1806

CORCORAN GALLERY OF ART

**Joshua Johnson** (born probably Baltimore, MD, 1761/63–  
died probably Baltimore, MD, after c. 1825)  
*Grace Allison McCurdy (Mrs. Hugh McCurdy) and Her Daughters,  
Mary Jane and Letitia Grace, c. 1806*

Oil on canvas, 43 5/8 x 38 7/8 in. (110.8 x 98.8 cm)

Museum Purchase through the gifts of William Wilson Corcoran, Elizabeth Donner Norment,  
Francis Biddle, Erich Cohn, Hardinge Scholle, and the William A. Clark Fund, 1983

#### ABOUT THE ARTIST

Joshua Johnson, the earliest known professional African-American artist, was the son of George Johnson—a white man from Baltimore County, Maryland—and an unknown slave woman. Johnson gained legal freedom upon completion of an apprenticeship with a blacksmith in Baltimore. The first documentation to identify him as a painter comes from a self-placed ad in a 1798 issue of the *Baltimore Intelligencer*, in which Johnson referred to himself as a “self-taught genius.” This claim has been debated by scholars due to Johnson’s complex pictorial compositions and Baltimore’s artistic environment in the early 19th century, which included the prolific **Peale family** of painters—particularly Charles Peale Polk—who may have influenced Johnson’s aesthetic development. Johnson painted notable and wealthy members of Baltimore’s society, as well as the tradesmen and merchants of the middle class. While Maryland participated in slavery, Baltimore had a large population of free African Americans; Johnson painted both landowners and **abolitionists**.

Though Johnson created over 100 works, he only signed one. Therefore, connoisseurs identify his images by his distinctive style. He did not date his paintings, leading scholars to estimate the chronology of each work based on the biographies of their respective subjects.

#### ABOUT THE ART

This **portrait** depicts Grace Allison McCurdy (1775–1822) and her two daughters, Letitia (on the right) and Mary Jane. A few years earlier, Grace and her husband—prominent Baltimore merchant Hugh McCurdy—had **commissioned** a portrait of older daughter

Letitia from Johnson, which is now in the collection of the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco. Speculation suggests that this painting of Mrs. McCurdy and her daughters was meant to be a portrait representing all four family members. But if this was the case, Hugh’s untimely death in 1805 altered that plan, effectively making this a mourning portrait.

Johnson captures the individuality of each subject, while visually linking them as a family unit through similarities in appearance, compositional elements, and repetition of color. All three wear white **empire-waist** dresses with subtle differences in the decoration on the sleeves and collars. Mrs. McCurdy wears a headband, while both girls have necklaces; Mary Jane’s is made of coral beads which were believed to ward off disease, and Letitia’s is a gold locket that may be engraved with her initials. Johnson depicts them with almond-shaped eyes, flushed cheeks, and pleasant, yet unsmiling expressions. The figures stand in front of a brass-tacked, upholstered sofa with a curved back, which passes behind each figure and echoes the diagonal line formed by their heads. Grace touches Mary Jane’s left shoulder. Mary Jane mimics her mother’s gesture by placing a hand on Mrs. McCurdy’s back. The sisters’ parallel arms and the green umbrella—which echoes the folds of Mary Jane’s dress—link the two girls. Repetition of color also creates a connection among the three, as the strawberry cluster, Mary Jane’s shoe, and the basket of berries form a horizontal line of red highlights. The implied narrative suggested by the strawberry-filled basket and the umbrella is rare in Johnson’s work.

#### SUGGESTED DIALOGUE

- What sort of activity do you think is implied by the basket of strawberries and the umbrella?
- How would your family want to be depicted in a portrait? Where would the painting be set? What would you be wearing? What objects could be incorporated to show your family’s interests?
- What expressions do you see on the figures’ faces? Are they somber? Happy? Bored?
- Are there clues in the clothing as to the social status of the family?

#### EXTENDED DIALOGUE

- Traditionally, **patrons** who commissioned a portrait would often decide how they dressed and what objects might be included in the finished work. How is that similar or different from the way that artists work today? What do you think the McCurdy family told Johnson about how they would like to be depicted?
- How do you think the social and political atmosphere of early 19th-century Baltimore influenced Johnson’s work as an African American artist?
- Do you think the McCurdy family’s selection of Johnson as their portraitist reflects their social or political views?

#### VOCABULARY

**Peale family:** Charles Wilson Peale (1741–1827) was the father of 17 children, including four artist sons named after famous Renaissance and Baroque painters. The most enduring legacy of this remarkable family was their collective influence on their contemporaries and on successive generations of artists working in Philadelphia and the northeastern United States.

**Abolitionist:** A person associated with the Abolitionist Movement in 19th-century America. This movement strived to gain freedom for all slaves and end racial discrimination.

**Portrait:** A portrait is a painting, photograph, sculpture, or other artistic representation of a person, in which the face and its expression is predominant. The intent is to display the likeness, personality, and even the mood of the person.

**Commission:** A patron hires an artist and pays them for a specific assignment. Because portraits were the most valuable art form in the early 19th century, patrons wanted portraits that captured special occasions, marked social status, depicted deceased relatives in an honorable manner, or were presented as gifts.

**Empire-waist:** A dress style in which the waistline falls directly below the bust. The style became very popular in the early 19th century, the time of the McCurdy’s family portrait.

**Patron:** An individual or institution providing financial support for artists to produce specific works of art. Many patrons influenced the subject matter and themes of artists’ work in accordance with their own preferences.

Support for Arts 101 materials is made possible in part by the Women’s Committee of the Corcoran and the DC Commission on the Arts and Humanities.

## ENDNOTES

Linda Crocker Simmons, "*Mrs. McCurdy and Her Daughters, Mary Jane and Letitia*" in *A Capital Collection: Masterworks from the Corcoran Gallery of Art*, ed. Amy Pastan (Lingfield, Surrey: Third Millennium Publishing Limited, 2002), 36-37.

Sarah Cash, "Joshua Johnson, *Mrs. McCurdy and Her Daughters, Mary Jane and Letitia*" in *Corcoran Gallery of Art: American Paintings to 1945*, ed. Sarah Cash, et al. (Washington, D.C.: Corcoran Gallery of Art in association with Hudson Hills Press, 2011), 210-211.

Susan Badder et al, "Joshua Johnson" in *Corcoran Gallery of Art African-American Art Educators' Resource Pack* (Washington, D.C.: Corcoran Gallery of Art Education Department, 1999), unpaginated.



Richard Diebenkorn, *Ocean Park #83*, 1975

CORCORAN GALLERY OF ART

# Richard Diebenkorn (born Portland, OR, 1922–died Berkeley, CA, 1993)

## *Ocean Park #83*, 1975

Oil on canvas, 100 x 81 in. (254 x 205.7 cm)

Museum purchase with the aid of funds from the National Endowment for the Arts, the William A. Clark Fund, and Mary M. Hitchcock, 1975

© The Estate of Richard Diebenkorn

### ABOUT THE ARTIST

Born in 1922 in Portland, Oregon, Richard Diebenkorn's introduction to art came through his early interest in illustrated adventure stories. His family moved to San Francisco in 1924, and Diebenkorn began his studies at Stanford University in 1940, with a concentration on studio art and art history. By the late 1940s, Diebenkorn's paintings, closely related to **Abstract Expressionism**, were gaining critical recognition for their organic forms and sumptuous gestural quality. After living in New Mexico and Illinois, Diebenkorn returned to the San Francisco area, and in 1955 he exhibited a group of new paintings. These landscapes and figure studies, concerned with pictorial structure, veered dramatically from the works created during his early abstract period.

During a U.S. State Department Cultural Exchange trip to Russia in 1965, Diebenkorn had the opportunity to study **Henri Matisse** paintings located in the country's cultural institutions, which had been unavailable to most of the world for decades. This experience, coupled with seeing the 1966 Matisse retrospective in Los Angeles, greatly influenced the work of Diebenkorn's next phase. The following year, he accepted a teaching position at UCLA and relocated from Berkeley in northern California, to Santa Monica in southern California. Within several months the artist embarked on the great cycle of paintings and works on paper known as the *Ocean Park* series, named after the neighborhood in which his new studio was located. The development of this body of work marked a definitive end to his **figurative** style, and began a period of unique, abstract images that he would continue developing until 1988.

### SUGGESTED DIALOGUE

- What qualities must a painting have to be called a landscape? Does *Ocean Park #83* have these qualities? If not, what type of painting is it?
- The lines and shapes in *Ocean Park #83* are not symmetrically arranged. Does the artist achieve balance in this composition? How?
- What color does your eye see when you first look at the painting? What do you think that color represents?
- Imagine you are visiting Ocean Park in Santa Monica, California. Based on Diebenkorn's paintings, what do you think you would see? How does it feel to be in this environment?

### EXTENDED DIALOGUE

- This painting is the 83rd that Diebenkorn created in the *Ocean Park* series. Why do you think artists make series of paintings? If you were to create a series of art works, what subject would you choose? How many would be in the series?

### ABOUT THE ART

*Ocean Park #83* is part of a series of over 140 paintings that can be seen as a synthesis of the artist's previous explorations and influences, including Abstract Expressionism and the works of Matisse. Despite these connections, the *Ocean Park* series is a luminous and spontaneous mode of expression that uniquely belongs to Diebenkorn.

The images employ drawing as a structural element to contain areas of color that appear to allude to the sky, ocean, hills, architecture, and beach of Diebenkorn's Santa Monica neighborhood in Los Angeles. The sharp contrast between the brilliant coastal light and the blue-black shadows cast on the beach are abstracted and transformed into a geometric arrangement of lines and rectangles. Ocean Park's environment and space are shaped by color and light. The multi-layered appearance of *Ocean Park #83* reveals Diebenkorn's method of working—sketching directly on the canvas with charcoal or graphite, painting, scraping, and refining. The surface is rich with its own record of experience permitting “ghosts” of earlier layers of color and linear experiments to reveal, through its semi-transparent body, the process Diebenkorn used to create the image.

### VOCABULARY

**Abstract Expressionism:** The movement in American painting, centered mainly in New York that flourished in the 1940s and 1950s. Styles ranged from spontaneous, gestural compositions that paid attention to the qualities of the painting materials and stood as records of the painting process, to contemplative, near monochromatic works featuring large areas of color.

**Henri Matisse (1869–1954):** Widely regarded as one of the greatest artists of the 20th century, Matisse is known for his use of color and his fluid and original draftsmanship. Known primarily as a painter, he also created drawings, sculpture, prints, and cut-paper works.

**Figurative:** Pertaining to representation of form or figure in arts.

## ENDNOTES

Jack Flam, *Richard Diebenkorn Ocean Park* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, Inc., 1992), 32-33.

Gerald Nordland, *Richard Diebenkorn the Ocean Park Series: Recent Work* (exhibition catalogue, Marborough Gallery, New York, 1971), 10-12.

John Elderfield, "Figure and Field" in *Richard Diebenkorn* (exhibition catalogue, Whitechapel Art Gallery, London, 1991), 13-33

*Richard Diebenkorn Catalogue Raisonné*. Web:

Eleanor Heartney, "Nature" in *A Capital Collection: Masterworks from the Corcoran Gallery of Art*, ed. Amy Pastan (Lingfield, Surrey: Third Millennium Publishing Limited, 2002), 122.



Sam Gilliam, *Blue Twirl*, 1971

CORCORAN GALLERY OF ART

# Sam Gilliam (born Tupelo, MS, 1933–lives and works in Washington, D.C.)

## *Blue Twirl*, 1971

Acrylic on canvas, 72 x 72 x 2 1/2 in. (182.88 x 182.88 x 6.4 cm)

Gift of the Women's Committee of the Corcoran Gallery of Art, 1972

© Sam Gilliam

### ABOUT THE ARTIST

Sam Gilliam, a prominent Washington, D. C. artist, was born in Tupelo, Mississippi and grew up in Louisville, Kentucky. Gilliam received both his B.A. in fine arts and his M.F.A. in painting from the University of Louisville, where he created paintings similar to those associated with California's **Bay Area Figurative Movement**. He moved to D.C. in 1962, around the time that artists associated with the **Washington Color School** were attracting national attention. Interested in the tools and techniques of his new colleagues, Gilliam began to experiment with unprimed canvas and **Magna** acrylic resin paints. He attained his first signature style of abstract painting in the late 1960s by pouring, dripping, and splashing acrylic pigment directly onto unprimed canvas. Gilliam eventually departed from the traditional practice of painting on two-dimensional canvases stretched over wooden bars. These unstretched canvases explored the intersection of painting, sculpture, and architecture. Gilliam remains committed to investigating paint as a medium with diverse potential. He has taught in D.C. public schools and at several colleges and universities—including the Corcoran School of Art—and continues to influence generations of younger artists who regard paint as a material to which they can give shape and volume.

### SUGGESTED DIALOGUE

- How do you feel when you look at Gilliam's canvas, *Blue Twirl*? What mood do you think it best represents?
- To where is your eye drawn first? Can you find a focal point on the canvas? What kind of lines do you see? Describe the shapes.
- What did Gilliam do first to begin this work? How do you think he decided when the painting was finished?
- Where do you see "hard edges" of paint? Where are the softer areas of color?
- Can you imagine the process through which Gilliam created *Blue Twirl*?

### EXTENDED DIALOGUE

- What words would you choose to explain *Blue Twirl* to someone who hasn't seen the image?
- How does Gilliam's manner of abstract painting differ from that of Alma Thomas? If you wanted to create an abstract work of art, which style would you choose?
- Many artists, including Sam Gilliam, are influenced by music. Do you think Gilliam might have been listening to music when he created *Blue Twirl*? If so, what type of music?

### ABOUT THE ART

To make *Blue Twirl*, part of Gilliam's early signature "slice" series, the artist dripped and poured paint onto a six-foot-square unprimed canvas. He began by soaking and splattering the lightest colors of the composition, keeping in mind the spaces he wanted to leave devoid of color. Gilliam then applied the darker hues, glazing over the lighter layers—the pigments' absorption aided by a chemical substance called **water tension breaker**. The still-wet canvas was then folded back and forth on itself and left to dry in a heap on the floor. While the work was still in a pile, Gilliam applied paint to the exposed surface area in order to create texture and highlight the composition in ways that became apparent only later, when the work was spread out and examined. When the paint had dried and Gilliam unfurled the canvas, the creases translated into lines and swirls and the pools of paint became organic patterns that straddled those lines. *Blue Twirl's* beveled edge adds to the impression that the painting is emerging from the wall as a living, breathing object of weight and substance. This work and other slice paintings represented a departure from the geometric imagery and hard edges of other Washington Color School works.

### VOCABULARY

#### **Bay Area Figurative Movement:**

A mid-20th century art movement made up of a group of artists in the San Francisco Bay Area who abandoned working in the prevailing style of **Abstract Expressionism** in favor of a return to figuration in painting during the 1950s and onward into the 1960s.

**Washington Color School:** A loosely affiliated group of **color field** artist centered in Washington D.C. who, from the mid-1950s, explored geometric formality and the expressive qualities of color—often in large-scale paintings.

**Magna:** The world's first artist acrylic paint was developed in 1947. Magna can be mixed with turpentine or mineral spirits.

**Water tension breaker:** A substance mixed into water-based paints in order to facilitate the pigments' absorption into the canvas.

**Color Field paintings:** A type of painting which evolved in the United States in the mid-1950s and continued until the late 1960s. Fields of color were applied in an abstract manner across the canvas, which was regarded as a two-dimensional plane: conventional pictorial depth and gestural brushwork were rejected.

**Abstract Expressionism:** The movement in American painting, centered mainly in New York, that flourished in the 1940s and 1950s. Styles ranged from spontaneous, gestural compositions that paid attention to the qualities of the painting materials and stood as records of the painting process, to contemplative, near monochromatic works featuring large areas of color.

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Kerry James Marshall, *Voyager*, 1992

CORCORAN GALLERY OF ART

# Kerry James Marshall (born Birmingham, AL, 1955–lives and works in Chicago, IL)

## *Voyager*, 1992

Acrylic and collage on canvas, 91 7/8 x 86 1/2 in. (233.4 x 219.7 cm)  
Gift of the Women's Committee of the Corcoran Gallery of Art, 1993  
© 2010 the Artist c/o Jack Shainman Gallery

### ABOUT THE ARTIST

Kerry James Marshall was born in Birmingham, Alabama in 1955. When he was a young boy, his family moved to a housing project in the neighborhood of **Watts** in Los Angeles, California. After looking at his kindergarten teacher's scrapbook of greeting cards, photographs, and magazine advertisements, Marshall was inspired to create such images, and decided to become an artist. He received both a Bachelor of Fine Arts in 1978, and an Honorary Doctorate in 1999, from Otis College of Art and Design. Marshall currently lives and works in Chicago, Illinois.

The environment of radical black empowerment and the events of the late 1960s profoundly shaped Marshall and the content of his work. The subject matter of his paintings, installations, and public projects is often drawn from African-American popular culture, and is rooted in the geography of his upbringing: "You can't be born in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1955 and grow up in South Central [Los Angeles] near the **Black Panthers** headquarters, and not feel like you've got some kind of social responsibility. You can't move to Watts in 1963 and not speak about it. That determined a lot of where my work was going to go," says Marshall. He began his professional career in the 1980s—a time when painting was often belittled as retrograde. However, Marshall's choice of such a traditional medium has furthered his ability to communicate formal and conceptual ideas to his audience. His work, rooted in figurative painting that is heavily symbolic and rich in its use of metaphor, is often monumental and memorializes African American experience and history. A striking aspect of Marshall's style is the emphatically black skin tone of his figures; a development the artist says emerged from an investigation into the invisibility of blacks in America and the unnecessarily negative connotations associated with darkness.

### SUGGESTED DIALOGUE

- How has the artist divided the canvas/picture plane? Where is the horizon line? The sky? What is in the center of the picture?
- What mood does the painting convey? What is optimistic about the work? What are pessimistic features? At what is the woman looking? Why is the male figure almost hidden by the sail?
- The ship *Wanderer* was involved in transporting slaves from Africa to Georgia. Who is in control of the *Wanderer* here? To what destination is the couple sailing? From where did they depart?
- Can you see areas of paint drips on this work? Why do you think the artist created this type of surface on the painting?

### EXTENDED DIALOGUE

- Does this story have a happy ending?

### ABOUT THE ART

Marshall's work connected to a broad range of art-historical references, from Renaissance painting to black folk art. Water and boats appear in many of Marshall's paintings from the mid-1990s as metaphors for spiritual transformation and also for the **African Diaspora** and the **Middle Passage**. Several works from this period such as *Voyager* are derived from actual events in American history. Marshall based this picture on the story of *Wanderer*, a luxury schooner from the New York Yacht Club that was secretly outfitted to carry African slaves to Georgia. The painting juxtaposes the journey of life and that of *Wanderer's* voyage; painted roses, egg shapes, and collaged medical illustrations of embryos represent themes of birth, death, and regeneration. The line drawings of symbols and numbers that surround the man and woman in the boat derive from Afro-Cuban *nsibidi* and *anaforuana*, many of which refer to West African gods worshipped in the Americas. The painted destination of Marshall's *Wanderer* is inconclusive; it teeters between an optimistic conclusion, alluded to by the roses and rainbow in the clouds, and a more ominous ending, suggested by the darkness of the upper background and the skull placed directly under the boat's hull. The people in Marshall's picture are similarly mysterious. The male is almost totally obscured by the sail, while the female sits prominently in the ship's prow, garlanded by roses. Delicate line drawings etched into the dark paint of the figures define their features. The ground of the large painting is an unstretched canvas whose grommeted edges mimic the texture and look of sail cloth.

### VOCABULARY

**Watts:** A mostly residential neighborhood in South Los Angeles, California. Long-standing resentment by Los Angeles' working-class black community over discriminatory treatment by police and inadequate public services exploded on August 11, 1965, into what were commonly known as the Watts Riots.

**Black Panthers:** an African-American revolutionary organization active in the United States from the mid-1960s into the 1970s. Founded in Oakland, California, the organization created a doctrine calling for the protection of African American neighborhoods from police brutality.

**African diaspora:** The movement of Africans and their descendants to places throughout the world. The term has been historically applied in particular to the descendants of the Black Africans who were enslaved and shipped to the Americas by way of the Atlantic slave trade.

**Middle Passage:** The forcible passage of African people from Africa to the Americas, as part of the Atlantic slave trade. Ships departed Europe for African markets with commercial goods, which were in turn traded for kidnapped Africans who were transported across the Atlantic as slaves; the enslaved Africans were then sold or traded as commodities for raw materials, which would be transported back to Europe to complete the "triangular trade".

**Nsibidi:** An ancient ideographic writing system that was invented by the Ekoi people and is indigenous to what is now southeastern Nigeria. Nsibidi is said to date back between 4000 and 5000 BC. Nsibidi was transported to Cuba and Haiti via the Atlantic slave trade, where it influenced the creation of *anaforuana* symbols.

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Gordon Parks, *American Gothic*, Washington, D.C., 1942

CORCORAN GALLERY OF ART

# Gordon Parks (born Fort Scott, KS, 1912–died New York, NY, 2006)

## *American Gothic, Washington, D.C., 1942*

Gelatin silver print, 43 9/16 x 31 7/8 in. (81 x 110.6 cm)

The Gordon Parks Collection, 1998

© The Gordon Parks Foundation

### ABOUT THE ARTIST

Gordon Parks is best known for his pioneering **photojournalism** and filmmaking which chronicle racism, poverty, crime, segregation, and other social ills through the second half of the 20th century. Parks also worked in other media, including literature, poetry, and music; in all he expressed a message of hope in the face of adversity.

Born in Fort Scott, Kansas in 1912, Parks grew up in an environment of extreme poverty and racism. While working on a train as a dining car waiter in 1937, Parks came across a magazine containing images of migrant workers photographed by **Farm Security Administration** (FSA) photographers. He was profoundly moved and purchased his first camera in 1938. In January 1942, Parks moved from Chicago to Washington, D.C. to work as an intern for the FSA, focusing his camera on African American life in the city. Upon his arrival, Parks found that Washington was still segregated, and he used his camera as a weapon to fight the bigotry he witnessed. He created portraits of African Americans at work and on the street, as well as families in their homes and churches. Parks continued his photographic career with the Office of War Information and Standard Oil of New Jersey in the 1940s, and became the first African American staff photographer for Life magazine in 1947. In 1963 Parks wrote *The Learning Tree*, a novel about his childhood in Kansas, and he later directed an award-winning feature film of the same subject. Through the 1980s, Parks continued his work with film as well as musical compositions. The Corcoran's Gordon Parks Collection Archives is the result of a 1998 gift of 227 photographs from Parks.

### SUGGESTED DIALOGUE

- What message do you think Parks was trying to convey in the photograph?
- Do you think Parks' image of Ella Watson is understood today in the same way it was in 1942?
- How important is the American flag to the composition?
- If Watson were posed in front of a door, wall, or another part of the office, how would it impact the photograph?
- Can you think of other memorable photographs that include the American flag?
- Imagine that Parks had created a painting rather than a photograph of Watson. Would that change your interpretation of the image?
- Washington, D.C. is part of the title of Parks' photograph. Do you think similar images could have been recorded in cities other than D.C. in 1942? What about today?

### EXTENDED DIALOGUE

- Gordon Parks used this image of Ella Watson to express how he felt about the racial bigotry he experienced in Washington, D.C. If you were to create a visual depiction showing what you experience day-to-day, what would you select? Would you choose a problem or an advantage in your city, or perhaps an issue that affects the entire country?

### ABOUT THE ART

*American Gothic, Washington D.C.* portrays Ella Watson, a government **charwoman** working at the Farm Security Administration. Economist Roy Stryker, Parks' supervisor at the FSA, suggested that he should learn about life in Washington before photographing the city. Before long, he had been refused service at a movie theater, a department store, and a lunch counter. He used these experiences to inform his work when he met and photographed Watson, exploring her role at the FSA as well as her place in society. Parks took numerous photographs of Watson and her family, and she became one of his most important subjects. Parks considers *American Gothic, Washington, D.C.*—now an icon of American culture—his first and one of his most significant professional photographs.

Parks fashioned this image after **Grant Wood's** 1930 painting, *American Gothic*, which depicts a farm couple posed in front of their house and barn. In Parks' photograph, Watson, like the farmer, looks directly at the viewer; her broom and mop take the place of the farmer's pitchfork. By filling the **background** with the American flag—in place of the farmhouse seen in Wood's picture—and posing the somber yet dignified Watson in the **foreground** with her tools, Parks suggests that Watson does not share the freedom symbolized by the flag. For Parks and other African Americans living in a segregated society, freedom could not be found in a nation "riddled by fear and poverty." The photograph provides a stark look at the pre-Civil Rights era in America, directly through the eyes of a photographer who had not only experienced poverty and racism, but knew how to depict it on film.

### VOCABULARY

**Photojournalism:** Photojournalism is a particular form of journalism that collects and creates photographic images in order to tell a news or feature story. Photojournalism is distinguished from other kinds of photography by the qualities of timeliness, objectivity, and narrative.

**Farm Security Administration:** The Farm Security Administration, or FSA, was a federal agency created to help fight rural poverty during the **Great Depression** by assisting poor farmers to gain access to workable land. The Information Division of the FSA, directed by Roy Stryker, employed many great photographers to help document and publicize, growing poverty, the dust bowl landscape, the resettlement of farmers, and the ongoing work of the FSA between 1935 and 1942.

**Charwoman:** A woman employed to clean either houses or office buildings.

**Grant Wood:** Grant Wood is an American artist, best known for his **Regionalist** paintings of the Midwest. He primarily worked in Iowa, depicting images of rural America. He made four trips to Europe, and was very influenced by Northern Renaissance art. His most famous work is *American Gothic* from 1930.

**American Gothic:** *American Gothic* was painted in 1930 by artist Grant Wood. It remains one of the most famous paintings in American art today. Reworked, parodied, and satirized by many artists, *American Gothic* depicts an farming couple in Iowa standing in front of their Gothic Revival house.

**Background:** The part of the picture plane that seems to be farthest from the viewer.

**Foreground:** The part of a two-dimensional artwork that is nearest to the viewer or in the front.

**Great Depression:** The Great Depression occurring during the 1930s. It originated in the U.S., beginning with the crash of the stock market in 1929. Prices skyrocketed as did unemployment, and the country's economy did not truly recover until the United States entered World War II in late 1941.

**Regionalism:** Regionalism is an American art movement that became prominent during the 1930s. Regionalist artists—shunning the use of abstract and modernist forms—created scenes of rural life and the countryside.

Support for Arts 101 materials is made possible in part by the Women's Committee of the Corcoran and the DC Commission on the Arts and Humanities.

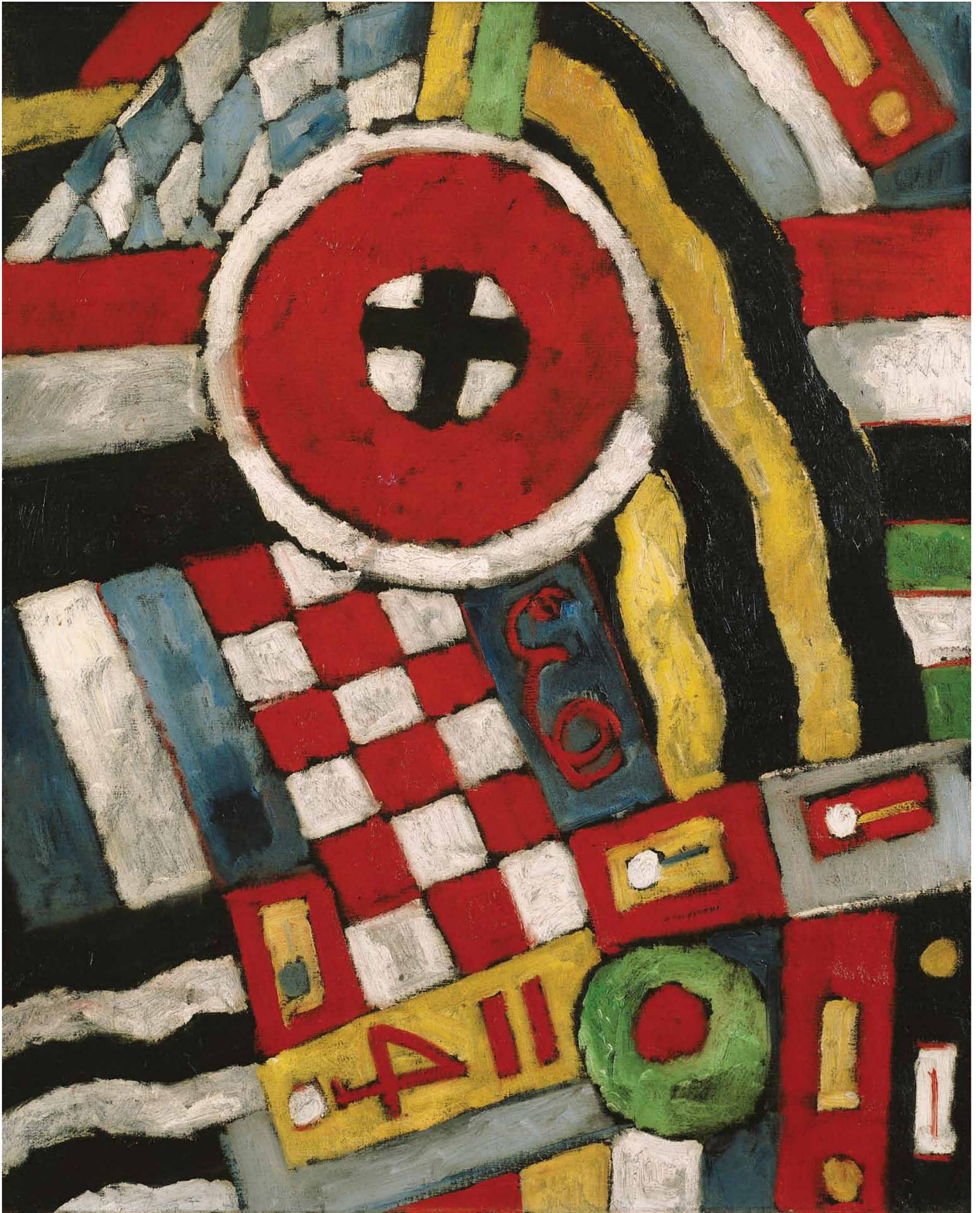
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Marsden Hartley, *Berlin Abstraction*, 1914/15

CORCORAN GALLERY OF ART

# Marsden Hartley (born Lewiston, ME, 1877–died Ellsworth, ME, 1943)

## *Berlin Abstraction*, 1914/15

Oil on canvas, 31 13/16 x 25 1/2 in. (80.8 x 64.8 cm)  
Museum Purchase, Gallery Fund, 1967

### ABOUT THE ARTIST

Marsden Hartley was an important modernist artist of the early 20th century. Born in Maine in 1877, he moved constantly throughout his adult life, never retaining the same residence for more than ten months. Alfred Stieglitz, photographer, art dealer, and director of the progressive Gallery 291 in New York City, was an early supporter of Hartley's work. Inspired by the cutting-edge art exhibited in his mentor's gallery and encouraged by Stieglitz, Hartley initially pursued an **avant garde** style of painting. However, he abandoned abstraction for almost two decades following World War I, only returning to it when he moved back to his home state in his later years.

Hartley made a formative trip to Europe in April 1912. Two years later he spent several months in Paris and then traveled to Berlin to renew friendships with a young German lieutenant, Karl von Freyburg, and Freyburg's sculptor cousin, Arnold Ronnebeck. The urban metropolis immediately captivated the artist, who hailed it "without question the finest modern city in Europe." Several months later, von Freyburg was killed on the **Western Front** of World War I, plunging Hartley into a deep depression. *Berlin Abstraction*, part of the larger "War Motifs" series, was one of the resultant paintings.

### ABOUT THE ART

*Berlin Abstraction's* colorful patterns and numbers represent Hartley's fallen friend, Karl von Freyburg. By choosing not to eulogize von Freyburg with a traditional portrait, Hartley made a painting whose message is conveyed by signs and symbols. The red number 4 on the yellow **epaulet** refers to the Fourth Regiment of the Kaiser's

guard, in which von Freyburg fought and died; the blue curlicue E stands for Queen Elisabeth of Greece, the patron of Ronnebeck's brigade; the red and white checkerboard alludes to von Freyburg's love of chess; and the blue and white diamond pattern signifies the **Bavarian** flag. The central black cross may suggest the Iron Cross, a military decoration for bravery awarded to von Freyburg shortly before he died.

On another level, the painting's primary colors and sense of movement also express the imperial pageantry and new modernity of Berlin that so enthralled Hartley. He was deeply impressed by the city's orderliness and cleanliness, qualities he attributed to the armed forces' presence. The deep reds, yellows, whites, and blacks describe the officers' eye-popping uniforms and the bold flags and draperies of the military parades.

The second decade of the twentieth century was a period of fervent artistic innovation, and Hartley participated in the radical new styles sweeping across Europe. *Berlin Abstraction* synthesizes the new pictorial language of abstract art, fusing the emotionalism of **Symbolism** with the look of **Synthetic Cubism**. Unfortunately, *Berlin Abstraction* and the other paintings in Hartley's *War Motifs* series were poorly received in America. They were exhibited in 1916 at Gallery 291, but with the United States embroiled in a war with Germany and sensitivities running high, many criticized the perceived pro-German message. Hartley claimed that the series had no political underpinnings and "no symbolism whatsoever." It was only after his death that the private nature of these paintings was discovered.

### SUGGESTED DIALOGUE

- Why did Hartley choose not to paint a straightforward portrait of his deceased friend, Karl von Freyburg?
- Can the numbers, colors, and patterns that symbolize various aspects of Karl von Freyburg's life take on meanings not intended by Hartley? Are there any that resonate with you or remind you of your own experiences?
- Imagine that you were to create a painting or sculpture that would represent important aspects of your life through signs and symbols. What are important interests for you? What signs and symbols would you choose to represent important facets of your life? Do you think your friends or family would be able to "read" your work of art and recognize attributes that symbolize you?

### EXTENDED DIALOGUE

- Can abstract art tell a story? How?
- How do artists arrange patterns and shapes to create a narrative? Do color choices affect our interpretation? Can brushwork communicate such things as calm serenity or violent speed? How can other elements of art and design contribute to narratives in abstract work?

### VOCABULARY

**Avant-garde:** French for the "advance guard" or the "vanguard." The term refers to experimental or innovative people or art works that push the boundaries of the accepted cultural norm.

**The Western Front:** An armed frontier between lands controlled by Germany to the East and the Allies (France and the United Kingdom) to the West during World War I. The Western Front consisted of a system of trenches protected by recently invented barbed wire and machine guns.

**Epaulet:** A type of ornamental shoulder piece or decoration used as insignia of rank by armed forces and other organizations.

**Bavaria:** A state in southeastern Germany. Its capital, Munich, was a center of artistic production in the early twentieth century.

**Symbolism:** An artistic movement popularized in France in the late 1800s. The denial of space and thus the denial of the illusion of reality is a major component of Symbolist painting. Another basic feature of Symbolist art is an interest in spiritualism.

**Cubism:** Generally acknowledged to have been the most significant movement in 20th-century art, Cubism was created by Georges Braque (1882-1963) and Pablo Picasso (1881-1973) in the period 1907-14. It abandoned the traditional fixed viewpoint which had dominated western painting for centuries, and instead explored a multiplicity of viewpoints to develop an accumulated idea of the subject.

**Synthetic Cubism:** A later form of Cubism that developed around 1912 in which the Spanish painter Juan Gris (1887-1927), also played a vital role. In this style of painting, the image was built up from pre-existing elements or objects, rather than being created through a process of fragmentation as in Analytical Cubism; color was also reintroduced.

Support for Arts 101 materials is made possible in part by the Women's Committee of the Corcoran and the DC Commission on the Arts and Humanities.

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Jessica Stockholder, *Untitled*, 1994  
CORCORAN GALLERY OF ART

# Jessica Stockholder (born Seattle, WA, 1959–lives and works in New Haven, CT) , 1994

Plastic sink legs, clothing, trimming, string, yarn, wood, hardware, piece of furniture, papier- mâché, plaster, wallpaper paste, glue, acrylic and oil paint, cable, silicone and latex caulking, and plastic fruit

93 x 50 x 82 in. (236.22 x 127 x 208.28 cm)

Gift of the Women's Committee of the Corcoran Gallery of Art, 1996

## ABOUT THE ARTIST

Born in Seattle, Washington, Jessica Stockholder studied painting at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver, and received a Master of Fine Arts from Yale University in 1985. She was awarded an honorary Doctor of Arts degree from Emily Carr College of Art, Vancouver, BC, in 2010. Since 1999, she has been on the faculty at Yale and currently is professor and director of Graduate Studies in Sculpture. Stockholder is known for creating multimedia **installations** that transcend genres. Her floor and wall pieces have been described as “paintings in space.” Stockholder’s complicated installations incorporate the architecture in which they have been conceived, often blanketing the floor, scaling the walls and ceiling, and even spilling out of windows and through doors. The works are no longer made on the surface of a canvas (mounted or otherwise), but in space—the same space in which the spectator exists. On initial viewing Stockholder’s work may look chaotic, however, closer observation shows how decisions about the application of formal properties have rendered precisely orchestrated inventions.

To create each piece, Stockholder employs a variety of everyday materials such as yarn, toys, laundry baskets, and curtains as well as construction materials including brick, concrete, plywood, and sheetrock. Stockholder explores art of the past through a humorous approach to color and composition. Influenced by **Henri Matisse**, Stockholder has a strong interest in the pulsating energy that colors can create in works of art. Bringing the vibrant, brightly colored products of consumer culture to her work through found objects, she later adds painted areas to create dialogues that give each color maximum optical appeal.

## SUGGESTED DIALOGUE

- The work does not have a title, what would you name it?
- Why did the artist attach the art to the wall?
- What could the article of black and green clothing on top of the furniture represent?
- There is plastic fruit nailed to a section of the work, what do you think that symbolizes?
- If you were to create a multimedia work of art based on things found at home, what would you use?

## EXTENDED DIALOGUE

- Since Stockholder is using some salvaged material, would she be considered an environmentally conscious artist?
- Do you think the term “paintings in space” accurately describes Stockholder’s work?

## ABOUT THE ART

This work from 1994 is a small scale example of Stockholder’s ability to transform unrelated objects into **hybridized** works of art. It is composed of materials that might be found in any typical home including a small bed, plastic sink legs, clothing, yarn, and hardware. The bed rests on the floor, tethered to the wall by two lengths of wood that are bolted together and draped with fabric, some of which is painted. The wood is attached to the wall by a loop of wire that hangs on a nail, giving the impression that the overall composition resembles a three-dimensional painting of a brightly colored interior. However, unlike a traditional painting, it cannot be fully appreciated from one point of view and should be explored from all sides. The work is clearly not created on the surface of a canvas but in space.

Stockholder believes that prefabricated items such as the ones used here, are raw material for creativity. The painterly surface of the bed is covered in several shades and textures of green pigment topped with a folded rectangle of black velvet. Fruit, a traditional symbol of the brevity of earthly life in paintings, often appears in both real and artificial forms in Stockholder’s work. Here, plastic produce is cut into sections and nailed onto the red side bar.

“My work often arrives in the world like an idea arrives in your mind. You don’t quite know here it came from or when it got put together, nevertheless it’s possible to take it apart and see that it has an internal logic.”

## VOCABULARY

**Installations:** Installation art is an assemblage or environment specifically created for a particular interior (very often a gallery). Early Installations were viewed as temporary, many are now intended to be permanent and are viewed as collectable.

**Henri Matisse (1869–1954):** Widely regarded as one of the greatest artists of the 20th century, Matisse is known for his use of color and his fluid and original draftsmanship. Known primarily as a painter, he also created drawings, sculpture, prints, and cut-paper works.

**Hybridized:** Something of mixed origin or composition.

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Robert Colescott, *Auvers-sur-Oise  
(Crow in the Wheat Field)*, 1981

CORCORAN GALLERY OF ART

# Robert Colescott (born Oakland, CA 1925–died Tucson, AZ 2009)

## *Auvers-sur-Oise (Crow in the Wheat Field)*, 1981

Acrylic on canvas, 84 x 72 in. (213.36 x 182.88 cm)

Gift of the Women's Committee of the Corcoran Gallery of Art, 1991

### ABOUT THE ARTIST

Born in Oakland, California, in 1925 Robert Colescott grew up drawing and painting. He received his Bachelor of Arts degree in 1949 and his Master of Arts in 1953, both from the University of California at Berkeley. After studying with the French artist **Fernand Léger** from 1949 through 1950, Colescott explored several different styles of painting. He spent the mid-1960s in Cairo, Egypt, where he developed his ideas about depicting narrative scenes in contrast to the traditions established in Western art. Colescott frequently **appropriated** icons of Western painting by artists including **Vincent van Gogh** and **Pablo Picasso** to comment satirically on issues of race, class, and gender. He often used racist imagery as the subject of his works as a means to transform and subvert characterizations and stereotypes. In 1997, Colescott became the first African American artist to represent the United States at the **Venice Biennale**.

### ABOUT THE ART

The title of this artwork, *Crow in the Wheat Field*, is similar to that of a famous work by Vincent van Gogh, *Wheat Field with Crows* (1890). In addition, the title of the painting refers to the town of Auvers sur Oise, where van Gogh spent his last years until his death in 1890. Colescott includes other references to van Gogh in this self-portrait: the sunflowers on his shirt and the boots

in the left foreground were subjects of van Gogh paintings; the headphones Colescott depicts himself wearing replace the bandage that appeared in several van Gogh self-portraits (following a self-inflicted wound to his ear); and the straw hat is very similar to one in which van Gogh often depicted himself. Despite the references to van Gogh, and the large image of the artist overlooking the entire scene, Colescott—who is seated at his easel—does not follow the French master's example of painting the surrounding landscape. Instead, he focuses on his choice of subject matter: the pink undergarments worn by the skeleton posing before him.

Through this image, Colescott explores the idea of recognition, both as an artist and as an African American. The skeletons salute each other, but does the grinning van Gogh acknowledge the kindred spirit hard at work in the picture's foreground? Using the word "crow" in the title, Colescott subverts the historic and derogatory nature of the term as one directed toward African American males by including himself in the picture, along with the painted birds hovering in the sky. Colescott said:

...In my self-portrait at Auvers sur Oise, where van Gogh died, I'm saying things about myself as a superficial representative of a superficial time, sitting there doing all the wrong things and representing all the wrong things, but I'm there, and I'm alive and I'm noble.

### SUGGESTED DIALOGUE

- What makes this image of Robert Colescott different from other self-portraits you might have seen?
- How would you describe Colescott's painting technique?
- The artist has created several paths through the wheat field; to what do they direct the viewer's eye?
- What do you think the skeletons represent in this painting?

### EXTENDED DIALOGUE

- Are you familiar with the art of Vincent van Gogh? What characteristics of van Gogh or his art do you recognize in Colescott's painting?
- Why do you think Colescott wanted to appropriate a painting by van Gogh for his subject matter? If you wanted to borrow from a famous work of art, what would you choose?

### VOCABULARY

**Fernand Léger** (1881-1955): A French painter, sculptor, and filmmaker. In his early works, he created a personal form of Cubism which he gradually modified into a more figurative, populist style. He is sometimes regarded as a forerunner of Pop Art because of his boldly simplified treatment of modern subject matter.

**Appropriation:** In the visual arts, to appropriate means to adopt, borrow, recycle or sample aspects (or the entire form) of visual culture in the creation of a new work.

**Vincent van Gogh** (1853-1890): A Dutch Post-Impressionist painter whose work had a far-reaching influence on 20th century art through its vivid colors and emotional impact. He suffered from anxiety and increasingly frequent bouts of mental illness throughout his life, and died, largely unknown, at the age of 37 from a self-inflicted gunshot wound. Today, he is widely regarded as one of history's greatest painters and an important contributor to the foundations of modern art.

**Pablo Picasso** (1881-1973): A Spanish artist who lived and worked most of his adult life in France. He is best known for co-founding the Cubist movement and for the wide variety of styles he explored in his work. His revolutionary artistic accomplishments brought him universal renown and immense fortune throughout his life, making him one of the best known figures in 20th century art.

**Venice Biennale:** A major contemporary art exhibition that takes place once every two years (in odd years) in Venice, Italy. The Biennale is based at a park, the Giardini, which houses 30 permanent national pavilions.

## ENDNOTES

Jake Lamar, "Auvers-sur-Oise (Crow in Wheat Field)" in *A Capital Collection: Masterworks from the Corcoran Gallery of Art*, ed. Amy Pastan (Lingfield, Surrey: Third Millennium Publishing Limited, 2002), 78-79.

Susan Badder et al, "Robert Colescott" in *Corcoran Gallery of Art African-American Art Educators' Resource Pack* (Washington, D.C.: Corcoran Gallery of Art Education Department, 1999), unpaginated.

Roberta Smith, "Robert Colescott, Painter Who Toyed With Race and Sex, Dies at 83," *New York Times*, June 10, 2009, A27.

Robert Colescott, quoted in "Conversation with Robert Colescott" by Ann Shengold, in *Robert Colescott: Another Judgment* (exh. cat.); Charlotte, North Carolina: Knight Gallery/Spirit Square Arts Center, 1985), unpaginated.