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(Afro-American)

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The Atlanta University Annual Exhibition: A Note on Its Ultimate Impact

TRYING TO DETERMINE the impact of the Atlanta University Exhibition of Black Artists on Black and non Black people required an in-depth study of the exhibition itself from 1942 to 1969. When the study commenced in 1969, there was no way to know that the exhibition would terminate at the end of the 1970 showing. The study, a doctoral dissertation for the University of Pittsburgh's School of Education, was designed for the purpose of determining the impact of the exhibition on the people who participated in it and those who viewed it.

Reasons for the study were: (1) to discover the purpose which the exhibition served; (2) to determine if there were exhibitions of black artists held prior to and during the continuance of the Atlanta University Exhibition; (3) to find out if black artists of this exhibition and other American artists of the same period chose similar subject matter for their art forms; and (4) to ascertain whether the impact of the Atlanta University Exhibition was positive or negative.

Research procedures employed a survey of professional literature related to black artists and their participation in exhibitions; visits to the Department of Public Relations and Publicity at Atlanta University; and researching the microfilm section of the Atlanta University Library.

A survey was made of professional literature relative to the history of black art and artists, black art education, American art history and art education of the period 1942-1969. Letters were sent to Dr. Hale Woodruff, the person responsible for planning and making the first Atlanta University Exhibition a reality. Inquiries were sent to some of the artists who participated in the exhibition through the years and to some of the patrons, both black and white, who viewed the exhibition through the years.

Findings from the research study indicate that the exhibition emancipated black artists in America from the prohibitions of a racial society by allowing the participants a chance to exhibit their work in a national exhibition at least once per year. Participation was restricted only by the quality of the work. If artists could achieve the desired quality in their work, problems of racism did not stand in their way.

Other exhibitions were held prior to and during the period of the Atlanta University Exhibition, but none of these was held with any degree of continuity. Although black artists could participate, the lack of continuous, annual participation on the part of developing artists could only be less than encouraging. Other exhibitions were either one year in length or fewer than the twenty-eight years which this exhibition covered.

Phyllos

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Subject matter chosen by the black artists who participated in the Atlanta University Exhibition and other American artists of the same period was similar. The subjects were taken from the environments of the artists. Both the black artists and non black American artists were, at some time during the 1940s, engaged in social comment. Subject matter in the works of art they produced spoke of as well as to the people. Sometimes what the artists said in their works resulted in critical commentary, and sometimes their visual expressions were content simply to tell local stories. Fantasy and religious subjects are among the many works of art by both groups. Burial, fear, and dancing are also common subjects appearing in works of art from group to group.

After the decade of the 1940s, with its emphasis upon people, situations, events, nature, and things, the decade of the 1950s only repeated the selection of much of the same subject matter. Of the artists who exhibited in the Atlanta University Annual Exhibition, the greater number were realists, and they selected and recorded everyday subjects with great simplicity and clarity. This art was understood by the average layman.

Several analogies in the subject choices of the black American artists and other American artists of the 1960s may be made. Although racism prevented them from exhibiting together, the common subjects which both groups selected are indicative of the awareness on their part of the kinds of phenomena which are peculiar to the interests of artists, generally. Such subject choices as "Troubled Woman" by Theodore Jones and "Crying Girl" by Roy Lichtenstein present striking similarities in the selection of subject matter relative to the emotions of women. Juxtaposing "As In An Arctic Sunrise" by Alvin Smith with "Horizon" by Anthony Caro, obvious concern for analyses of the universe by artists of the 1960s is apparent.

The similarities, generally, in subjects chosen by the two groups of artists far exceed the differences. One subject which the American artists of the decade of the 1960s did not select to any extent was that of racism. The black artists who exhibited in the Atlanta University Exhibition during the 1960s had reasons to protest against racism. The avoidance of racism was the chief reasons why they were exhibiting annually in the University exhibition in the first place.

Responses to a survey of participating black artists and both black and white viewers seeking to determine the degree of impact which the University Exhibition had upon them were overwhelmingly positive. The majority of those who responded to the survey state, in essence, that the Atlanta University Annual Exhibition did its part in helping to promote black consciousness and cohesiveness; it helped blacks to recognize, encourage, and support their own; and it played a basic and essential role in the development of the contemporary black artists and their creative expression.

