

ABSTRACT

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THE MURALS OF HALE ASPACIO WOODRUFF

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This study examines the life of Hale Woodruff as a muralist, chronicling his eight known murals and documenting his contributing to the current body of American Aesthetic scholarship.

The study was based on two intervening factors that contribute to his development as an artist and muralist: racism in the South and segregation of artists works in galleries.

A historical analysis approach was used to chronicle the murals of Woodruff. Oral interviews were conducted with his former students, associates, and colleagues. Using the data gathered, the researcher was able to chronicle Woodruff's eight known mural projects. The researcher found that the current level of knowledge about this artist is low among faculty, staff, students, and the general population. Data gathered during this research can be used to increase the awareness of Woodruff and his significant contributions to the American Art canon.

The conclusion drawn from these findings support that Woodruff was significantly inspired by both intervening factors. Neither factor significantly outweighed the other, however, both factors have contributed to the suppression of his works in the American Art canon.

THE MURALS OF HALE ASPACIO WOODRUFF

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

1. AHA – Atlanta Housing Authority
2. AMA – American Missionary Association
3. BCE – Before Common Era
4. CORE – Congress of Racial Equality
5. FAP – Federal Arts Project
6. OBAC – Organization of Black Culture
7. The Wall – The Wall of Respect
8. WPA – Works Progress Administration

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Hale Aspacio Woodruff was an erudite Social Realist painter whose talents resided in many artistic arenas. Known to many as a painter, Woodruff was also an arts educator, artist, printmaker, and muralist. As a muralist, Woodruff used walls as the backdrop for his social commentaries, effectively depicting scenes from the daily lives of Africans in America. Consequently, he considered the murals to be his greatest achievements. The canvases of his murals celebrate the global contributions and cultural influences of African-American people while documenting significant events in the people's history.

Woodruff recognized the significance of recording African-American history using the visual arts. During the 1920s and 30s, Woodruff, along with his contemporaries Charles Alston, Aaron Douglas, and Charles White, submitted their illustrations for publication in *The Crisis*, the official magazine for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Their illustrations served as the backdrop for literary commentators such as Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, and Claude McKay. These polemicists argued against racism and segregation in America through the use of their words and illustrations including murals.

Woodruff's venture in the genre of mural painting is significant. His murals express a powerful aesthetic grounded in social consciousness and have become African-centered modernists works of art. He and other artists such as Aaron Douglas, were very much aware of current issues in criticism, but followed the admonitions of philosopher Alain Locke who urged artists to uplift the race by producing works, which exhibit great skill and have meaning and significance to the African-American community. Charles Alston, John Biggers, and Charles White continued the tradition of celebrating the global contributions and cultural influences of people of African descent with their murals.

Woodruff's murals are interior wall paintings, connecting art and history in a powerful and compelling way. They engage the viewer in a powerful dialogue that is determined by the architectural space, the illusion of pictorial proximity, and the ethos images that may be drawn from historical, religious, and literary sources or from the artist's imagination. Formal values are expressed through scale, proportion, composition, pattern, color, and line. Painted and incised images on cave walls and cliff faces date as far back as 30,000 B.C.E.; the mural, with its strong narrative and symbolic abstract format has been seen throughout Africa, Asia, Europe, and the Americas. The works of Mexican muralists of the 1920s and 30s shaped the twentieth-century American conception of murals.

Put simply, murals serve as a means of publicly communicating the ideas, ideals, values, hopes, and aspirations of a people. For African Americans in particular, the mural has been a symbol of pride, dignity, endurance, and hope. It has served as an alternative vision of history as well as a major medium of social criticism and protest.

The public mural came to the immediate attention of hundreds of thousands of African Americans when the December 1967 issue of *Ebony* magazine featured modified panels of the “Wall of Respect,” the originals of which were painted earlier that year in Chicago by the artists of Organization of Black American Culture (OBAC).¹ “The Wall,” as it was frequently called, was a direct, raw, expressive work that communicated through formal and symbolic means that a new attitude was flourishing in black America.

The story of African-American murals, however, did not begin with the “Wall of Respect” in 1967. It began in a much less public way in Cincinnati, Ohio, more than a century earlier. Cincinnati was one of the thriving art centers of nineteenth-century America where skill, perseverance, and white abolitionist’s interests and wealth intersected, setting in motion a tradition of fine arts patronage that involved race and the use of the arts to promote social change. An outstanding African-American painter of this period was Robert Scott Duncanson (1821-72). Duncanson, a painter whose parents were of African-American and Scottish ancestry, began working as a glazier and house painter in 1838. Nicholas Longworth (1782-1863), a noted abolitionist attorney and art patron, commissioned Duncanson in 1850, to paint landscape murals for his Belmont mansion which is now the Taft museum.

Duncanson, a skillful house painter, taught himself to be a fine arts painter by sketching, copying European engravings, and painting portraits. Eventually, Duncanson received a commission to paint a mural; these opportunities for artists were rare. This achievement is all the more significant considering that at the time, Duncanson was being

¹ James Prigoff and Robin Dunitz, *Walls of Heritage, Walls of Pride: African American Murals* (San Francisco: Pomegranate Communications, 2000), 26.

recognized as “the finest landscape painter in the West.”² Nicholas Longworth, along with the support of abolitionists throughout the country and abroad, helped Duncanson and other artists to promote the idea that achievement in the fine arts were sufficient proof of African-American humanity.

In order to appreciate fully the long tradition of African-American mural art, one must first acknowledge the predecessors from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century whose works have gone virtually unrecognized. William Edouard Scott (1884-1964) and Aaron Douglas (1899-1979) were two such harbingers who grew up during the phase of the New Negro Movement. Scott studied at the Art Institute of Chicago and later traveled to Paris. Henry O. Tanner, an important role model to generations of African-American artists, befriended Scott and became his idol and mentor. Scott painted his first mural Chicago titled “Commerce,” in 1909 for Lane Technical High School.³ While Scott exemplifies the first phase of African-American mural painters, Aaron Douglas embodies the Harlem Renaissance. Less than two years after arriving in New York, Douglas was commissioned to paint his first mural “Jungle and Jazz,” for Club Ebony in Harlem. In 1930, Fisk University commissioned him to paint a series of murals for the University’s library. Again in 1930, Douglas was commissioned by the Sherman Hotel in Chicago to paint “Dance Magic” for its College Inn. In 1934, he

² Ibid., 24

³ Ibid., 25.

completed a mural titled “Aspects of Negro Life,” for the 135th Street Branch of the New York Public Library.⁴

Although the visual arts allowed Woodruff and his contemporaries to display their work to anyone interested, it was the Harlem Renaissance that awakened African Americans to the value of their artistic talents. The Harlem Renaissance helped redefine the African American by stimulating a love for and appreciation for black life, thus providing writers, dancers, musicians, and artists with cultural material whereby to introduce themselves and the “New Negro” to the world. Alain Locke, philosopher and educator, suggests that the term “New Negro” had been used occasionally during the late 1890s, but during the cultural renaissance of the 1920s it quickly became the term of choice to describe the spirit of many African Americans.⁵ According to Locke and W.E.B. Du Bois, the “New Negro” was responsible for alerting the world to the notion that there was a cultural awakening happening in the arts among African Americans in New York, other parts of the United States and around the world. Woodruff endured racism and segregation while living in Nashville, Tennessee and became a symbol of the “New Negro.” He embodied the emboldened spirit of alerting the world to the significant contributions and influences of the African American through his use of murals.

Woodruff’s research and absorption of African cultural ideas became the foundation for much of his subsequent work. Employed as an artist with the United States government sponsored Works Progress Administration (WPA) for several years,

⁴ Ibid., 13.

⁵ Alain Locke, *The New Negro* (New York: Albert and Charles Boni, 1925; reprint, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997), xii.

Woodruff created several priceless murals. In 1943, he received a Julius Rosenwald fellowship to paint in New York City. While there, he finished the Atlanta University murals and soon came under the influence of abstract expressionism; consequently, his style shifted to what he described as “semiabstract, symbolic painting.”⁶ He continued to paint the multi-dimensions of artistic abstraction for the rest of his life. As a founding member of “Spiral,” Woodruff gathered over a dozen African-American artists who joined together in New York City in 1962 to explore their common cultural experiences. He proposed the name to suggest the group’s need to reach broader circles.

Historians often contend that the African American’s contribution to American art usually reflects his struggle for social, economic, and political equality in the United States. Albert Barnes, art collector and writer, whose work is represented in Locke’s publication *The New Negro* states:

African-American artists have captured a moment in time, which depict the struggles of the masses of a people held together by like yearnings and stirred by the same causes. This visual imagery embodies the Negroes’ individual traits and reflects their sufferings. It is a great art because it embodies the Negroes’ individual traits and reflects their suffering, aspirations, and joys during long periods of acute oppression and distress.”⁷

Physicians, dentists, educators, entrepreneurs, lawyers, morticians, and others who comprised the bulk of the African-American affluent and influential embraced this new ideology of racial assertiveness.

⁶ “Hale Woodruff personal papers” (New York: Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture), 9.

⁷ Albert C. Barnes, *Negro Art in America*, quoted in Alain Locke’s *The New Negro*. (New York: Penguin Books, 1925; reprint, 1995), 19.

The early outdoor murals appeared in an era when blacks seldom appeared on television, except in Uncle Ben, Aunt Jemima, or Cream of Wheat's Rastus advertisements. Unlike the television images of blacks, these outdoor murals presented positive images of success for the African-American community. Later, heroic or accomplished individuals such as Muhammad Ali, John Coltrane, W.E.B. DuBois, Angela Davis, Bobby Seale, and Malcolm X appeared in murals. However, integrationists like Martin Luther King, Jr. and Roy Wilkins did not appear in many of the early murals because the consortium of artists preferred a more aggressive response to racial oppression. Woodruff utilized his mural projects to document the life accomplishments and historical achievements of Africans and African Americans.

Purpose of the Study

The purposes of this research are threefold: (1) to examine the life of Hale Woodruff as a muralist, (2) to chronicle and analyze Woodruff's eight known murals, thus providing the scholarship necessary to justify his inclusion in the American art canon, and (3) to document his significant contributions to the evolution of a distinctly African-American aesthetic. This study is important because although the contributions of Hale Woodruff are immense, they are not adequately represented in American or African-American art history texts. Consequently, most contemporary students and scholars alike are not aware of Woodruff's incredible artistic achievements and indeed may never have heard his name. Yet, this researcher contends strongly that an understanding of who Woodruff was and how he advanced a black aesthetic long before

the term was in vogue would increase any viewer's knowledge of art. Because of the contributions and influences of African peoples throughout the Diaspora, this researcher contends that any viewer's knowledge of art would be expanded if they were to examine Woodruff's murals.

To this extent, each of the murals will be chronicled and analyzed according to their thematic content. These eight mural projects have been categorized into four major groups: (1) *Social Commentary* - intended to convey lessons in moral and social values through symbolic iconography and guiding text, (2) *Historical* - interpreting or recalling passages of the African-American saga, (3) *Biblical* - interpreting the narratives of the Christian faith and how African Americans utilize these narratives in their art, and (4) *Art and Culture* - documenting social and cultural phenomena.

The murals categorized as Social Commentary include *Shantytown and Mudhill Row* (1934) and the *Negro in Modern American Life* (1934). The Historical Murals are *Amistad* and, *Founding of Talladega College* (1939). The mural project titled *Results of Poor Housing, Results of Good Housing* (1941) is categorized as Social Commentary. Panel two of The Golden State Life Insurance Murals, *History of California, Settlement and Development* (1948-49) represents a historical account of the African-American contribution to the growth and expansion of California. The *Wheat Street Murals* (1942) capture three biblical events from the New Testament, featuring the Christ, and is therefore, categorized as Biblical. *Art of the Negro* (1952) considered a Mural Epic, links a series of significant cultural events, and is, therefore, categorized as Art and Culture.

Significance of the Study

This research examines the significance and artist intended purpose of Woodruff's murals. Such a study was significant because of the dearth of information chronicling Hale Woodruff's eight known murals. Thus, this study provides a catalogue of where the murals are located and illumine what they offer aesthetically, thereby, enhancing the readers' understanding of African-American art. Unlike Woodruff's contemporaries, published information about him is limited and scattered in various sources. The aim of this research is to compile a comprehensive analysis of his murals to serve as a valuable resource for scholars and students whose interests pertain to African-American visual art in general and the artistic merits of Woodruff in particular. Additionally, this exploration establishes the place of Hale Woodruff in the creation of the African-American aesthetic, which has guided black artists since the days of the Harlem Renaissance.

Finally, information about his murals will be accessible to public schools, libraries, and art galleries across the nation. The researcher posits that this information will expose students to the contributions of African-American visual artists while also enhancing their appreciation of the artistic nuances Woodruff created in order to teach the world the history of his people.

Thesis Organization

This thesis is organized into six chapters. The *Introduction*, Chapter One, informs the reader of how the project is organized. Chapter Two, titled *The Formative Years*, illumines Woodruff's early life, outlining specific events and individuals who encouraged him to paint. Chapter Three, *The Atlanta University Years*, highlights

Woodruff's beginning as an art educator in Atlanta, including his formation of the "Outhouse School" and the "Atlanta University Annuals." Chapter Four, titled *The Early Murals (1934-1940)*, chronicles and analyzes four of Woodruff's murals painted between 1934-40. Woodruff's first murals, *Shantytown and Mudhill Row* (1934), originally installed at the Atlanta School of Social Work located on the campus of Atlanta University (now Clark Atlanta University), are no longer available. The fire that obliterated the School of Social Work building destroyed these murals also. The mural consisted of two panels that depicted the surrounding neighborhoods of the Atlanta University campus. His second mural titled *The Negro in Modern America Life*, painted and installed at David T. Howard High School (formerly David T. Howard Junior High) in 1934, consists of four panels: (1) Agriculture and Rural Life, (2) Music, (3) Literature, and (4) Art. The Talladega Murals, his third mural series, includes *The Amistad* and *The Founding of Talladega College* (1938-39).

Chapter Five, *The Latter Years (1941-1952)*, examines and analyzes the last four murals painted during his career. Woodruff received a commission from the Works Progress Administration (WPA) in 1942, for his fifth mural project, titled *Results of Poor Housing, Results of Good Housing*. This mural project consists of two panels and was originally installed at the Herndon Homes – an Atlanta Housing Authority Project. Upon completion of this project, Woodruff was commissioned to paint a second mural in 1942, which presented a religious theme.

Religious themes have been a mainstay of the African-American artist. In this vein, Reverend William H. Borders, pastor of Wheat Street Baptist Church in Atlanta,

Georgia commissioned Woodruff to paint his sixth mural project. This three-panel mural (triptych), will be referred to as the *Wheat Street Murals* (1942). The impact of the Black Church on the spiritual, economic, social, educational, and political interests can scarcely be overlooked. Murals that reside in the church serve as a powerful visual, usually stamping an indelible impression upon the viewer's psyche.

Woodruff, an accomplished painter with a keen eye for color, shape, and form, created murals for institutions of higher learning and African-American businesses. The owners of the Golden State Life Insurance Company approached Woodruff and commissioned him to paint a mural reflective of the role African Americans played in the development of California. Aptly named, *History of California, Settlement and Development* (Panel II) was completed and installed in 1942 in the lobby of the Golden State Life Insurance building in Los Angeles, California, making this Woodruff's seventh mural project.

Art of the Negro, a six-panel mural would be Woodruff's eighth and final mural project. This mural, housed in the "Aspacio" Atrium of Trevor-Arnett Hall at Clark Atlanta University was painted and installed at Atlanta University between 1950-1952. This mural serves as a reference point for modern man and his evolution with other cultures throughout time. It is here that Woodruff abandons realism for abstraction and his longstanding interest in African art found formal expression in this work.

Chapter Six, *Conclusion and Recommendations*, is the final chapter, and includes recommendations offered by the researcher and delineate possibilities for future research on or about Woodruff and his art.

CHAPTER TWO

THE FORMATIVE YEARS

*I was an only child. My mother was a widow and while she was cooking in somebody else's kitchen, I was out in the backyard sketching pictures. . . . When I told her I wanted to be an artist she said, 'All right son, if that's what you want to be, I'll help you to be it.'*¹

Hale Woodruff

From the beginning of his artistic career, Hale Woodruff received encouragement from his mother and the community at-large to pursue his artistic interests. Young Woodruff used his talent early in his career to address the social injustices African Americans encountered in their daily lives. By drawing political and editorial cartoons for the Pearl High School newspaper and later for the Indianapolis *Ledger* (his first paying job with a local newspaper), Woodruff addressed the issue of racial discrimination in America at a very young age. The editorial illustrations created by Woodruff reflected what life was like for the young artist and his mother. As a child, Woodruff experienced the oppression of racism and segregation first hand in Nashville, Tennessee. His mother, Augusta, was employed as a waitress in a small diner, and, often, the young Woodruff would accompany her to work. He

¹ Hale Woodruff, interview by Albert Murray, August 1978, tape 1, John Hewitt Papers Schomburg Collection, New York.

would sit and draw caricatures on the menus to pass the time until the end of his mother's shift.²

Early Nashville

When Woodruff was born, barely thirty-five years had passed since African Americans had been emancipated from slavery. Prior to Woodruff's birth, his mother worked as an indentured servant for the Hale family in California. While employed with this family, her employer's son impregnated Augusta. During the late nineteenth century, it was not uncommon for white men and their sons to rape black women who served as domestic employees. Because interracial marriages were illegal and because unwed mothers were socially unacceptable, Augusta moved from California (away from the Hale family) to Cairo, Illinois, where Hale Aspacio Woodruff was born on August 26, 1900. Why Augusta gave her son his father's last name is uncertain; however, this trend among black families of the times stood to remind mulatto children of their dual heritage.

At an early age, Hale Woodruff discovered his interest in drawing. An only child and sometimes alone, he would pass the time copying the ink drawings and engravings of Gustave Doré from the family Bible. His mother, also an artist, encouraged her son's penchant for the aesthetic.³ Woodruff states:

I was an only child. My mother was a widow and while she was cooking in somebody else's kitchen, I was out in the backyard sketching pictures. I had nothing else to do, nobody to play with in Nashville, TN. I used to draw and

² Edmund Gaither, *A Shared Heritage: Art by Four African Americans* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996), 171.

³ Winifred Stoelting, "The Atlanta Years: A Biographical Sketch" In *Hale Woodruff; Fifty Years of His Art* (Studio Museum in Harlem: New York, 1979), 10.

sketch all the time from about age 6. When I was in school, I enjoyed pictures from the history books – Julius Cesar, Pericles, Mark Anthony. My mother didn't interfere. When I told her I wanted to be an artist she said, 'All right son, if that's what you want to be, I'll help you to be it.'⁴

At twelve, Woodruff worked after school as a chore boy for Holt Café in downtown Nashville, helping his mother with his weekly earnings of three dollars. These long hours, however, did not dull Woodruff's interest in art. Quite the antithesis, the time assisted Woodruff in discovering that his hand-drawn menus of the restaurant's windows both pleased the customers and brought them back.⁵

Woodruff, who was already receiving encouragement from his mother and the community at large, now looked for a source of additional inspiration for the development of his artistic craft. In high school, he drew cartoons for the school paper, *The Pearl High Voice*, where his friend, George W. Gore was the editor. Together the two friends became known as great news gatherers. Frequently, the local Negro weekly, *The Nashville Globe*, used their paper as a source of news for its own columns. In the school library, Woodruff sought the copies of *The Crisis*, which carried art news and illustrations by African-American artists. From them he learned of Henry Ossawa Tanner, an African-American intellectual and artist, who became an internationally known painter. The works of this artist, his struggles to become a painter in the United States, and his eventual recognition in Europe deeply moved the young student.

⁴ Hale Woodruff, Interview by Albert Murray, August 1978, tape 1, John Hewitt Papers Schomburg Collection, New York.

⁵ Winifred Stoelting, "The Atlanta Years: A Biographical Sketch" In *Hale Woodruff; Fifty Years of His Art* (Studio Museum in Harlem: New York, 1979), 10.

It was Tanner whom Woodruff sought for additional instruction on the development of his artistic craft. Then seventeen, Woodruff vowed that he would go to Europe and see the paintings of a master, Henry O. Tanner.

The son of an African Methodist Episcopal bishop, Henry Ossawa Tanner was given his middle name after Osawatomie, the site of John Brown's anti-slavery raid in Kansas. Like Woodruff, he learned early about the debilitating nature of racism and segregation. While at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Tanner painted traditional European subjects such as landscapes and animals. In the 1890s, after receiving encouragement from his professor Thomas Eakins, he began painting genre scenes of African-American life, including his well-known work *The Banjo Lesson* (1893), which illustrates the continuity of passing African traditions from the older to younger generation. This serene subject matter diverted his attention from the social ills of his childhood to the humanity inherent in African-American folk culture.

By the end of the nineteenth century, Tanner was already an accomplished artist and had moved to France, after a short teaching career at Clark University⁶ in Atlanta, Georgia from 1889 to 1891. [Note: Clark University established 1869-1940, renamed Clark College 1941-1988 after relocating to the present location and upon consolidation with Atlanta University in 1989 became Clark Atlanta University].⁷ Tanner himself began painting around the age of thirteen. He had attended the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts where he studied with Thomas Eakins and others. Tanner moved to France from the United States in an attempt to practice his craft free from the oppressive forces

⁶ James P. Brawley, *The Clark College Legacy: An Interpretive History of Relevant Education 1869-1975* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), 164.

⁷ Ibid.

of racism and segregation in America. With the exception of brief visits home, Tanner continued to live and paint in France until his death in 1937.

Indianapolis YMCA

After completing high school in 1918, Woodruff sought an opportunity to study art. In the summer of 1919, Woodruff and his friend, George Gore, chose Indianapolis as the place to find work. While there, Woodruff visited the John Herron Art School and decided to enter in the fall. However, due to financial challenges Woodruff was unable to enroll. Consequently, much to his chagrin, he continued working menial jobs.

The first summer, Woodruff and his friend were houseboys at the Claypool Hotel where they scrubbed the carpets and suites of the nine-story hotel. The money they earned was used to pay for their rooms at the Senate Street YMCA. Other small jobs that Woodruff held included shoveling coal and ashes at the Indianapolis Athletic Club, mopping floors as a janitor at the YMCA, and washing dishes at the Stegemeier Restaurant.⁸ In the early 1920s, Woodruff secured a part-time assignment with the *Indianapolis Ledger*, a local African-American newspaper. Earning five dollars per drawing, Woodruff drew political cartoons that illustrated lynchings, police brutality, and segregation in education and housing.

After saving enough money for his enrollment, Woodruff finally entered the Herron Art School in the fall of 1920. There, he faced both encouragement and discouragement from his teacher. One of his teachers, William Forsyth, was an impressionist painter whom Woodruff admired greatly because of his landscape

⁸ Hale Woodruff, Interview by Albert Murray, August 1978, tape 1, John Hewitt Papers Schomburg Collection, New York.

paintings. However, Forsyth painted in an impressionistic style, and other students, as well as distinguished artists of the school, were devoted to these same traditions. Woodruff, discouraged by these traditions, sought to find a school where he could practice modernism. He found no one who could prepare him for the modernist era in painting which had begun to take hold. On one occasion, a painting by an elderly artist, Sidney Dickenson, was brought to the Herron Museum that showed a man with an elongated form. This distortion of the anatomy disquieted the staff and they dubbed the painting as artistic blasphemy. Nonetheless, the young students, among them Hale Woodruff, liked the painting.⁹ Many of these landscapes were imaginary views filled with explosions of vivid color that took the impressionist idiom to the brink of abstraction and that recall the expressive compositions of the Dutch post-impressionist Vincent van Gogh. The artist referred to his imaginary landscapes as “ultra-impressionist,” far removed from realism but still recognizable scenes. Throughout his career, Woodruff continued to interpret rather than simply to record his surroundings.¹⁰

In conventional portraiture, Woodruff admired the work of his close friend and older colleague John Wesley Hardrick, even though the elder artist’s approach was different from his own. Hardrick was concerned with the sitter’s quality, while Woodruff expressed his own thoughts about the subjects. Both painters’ styles however, were similar when they painted the portrait of Countee Cullen. A highlight of those years shared by the two painters was a fine collection of medieval Italian art

⁹ Stoelting, 10.

¹⁰ William E. Taylor and Harriet G. Warkel, *A Shared Heritage: Art by Four African Americans* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996), 60.

loaned to the Museum Collection of the Herron Art Institute, now the Indianapolis Museum of Art by the Kress Foundation.¹¹ Woodruff saw these paintings as magnificent jewels and noted their remarkable freshness, thus increasing his interest in European art.

Although his interest in European art increased, Woodruff was again beset by financial problems. His inability to pay his tuition and fees in advance prevented his regular attendance. He appealed to his employer at the “colored Y” for an advance on his wages. This was unacceptable to the art school and eventually Woodruff had to withdraw permanently. For a brief period he enrolled at the Art Institute of Chicago for part-time study. This broadened his horizons, but eventually he returned to Indianapolis where he continued to work at the local YMCA and paint independently.¹²

Hale Woodruff’s goal was to become a landscape painter. Brown County, south of Indianapolis, was nationally known for its beautiful year-round scenery. It was also home to a colony of active artists who sponsored frequent shows at the county fairs. When time permitted, Woodruff painted in these beautiful locales and many of his paintings were purely imaginary. His work and his studies confined him indoors to such an extent that he rarely had an opportunity to go to the country – a fact which heightened his longing for outdoors.¹³

From an unsuspected source, Woodruff learned about African art. Frequenting an art and photography supply shop owned by the art dealer Hermann Lieber, Woodruff

¹¹ Hale Woodruff, Interview by Albert Murray, August 1978, tape 1, John Hewitt Papers Schomburg Collection, New York.

¹² Taylor and Warkel, 60.

¹³ Ibid.

grew to be known by other artists. At times, Woodruff would bring his own work to the little gallery on the second floor of the shop. One day when he entered the store, Mr. Leiber handed him a book and suggested that he might be able to learn from it. Woodruff could not read *Afrikanische Plastik* by Carl Einstein, but its pictures fascinated him. From then on, he sought the meaning of forms in this traditional art. Of this experience Woodruff recounts:

In 1923, when I was in art school there was a local art supply dealer that I used to go to get art supplies. One day he showed me a book on African Art written in German by Carl Einstein, *Negerplastik* [sic]. It was the first book of its kind ever published. It had reproductions of Valuvo [sic] people of what is now Zaire that dealt with African sculpture art. Beautiful figures! I just marveled at them.¹⁴

This was a defining moment in Woodruff's career. From this point in his life he became increasingly fascinated with the form found in African art and sculpture.

Dr. Eugene Grigsby, Professor Emeritus, retired art chair at Arizona State University, and former student of Hale Woodruff, states: "Woodruff's fascination with other cultures and peoples greatly influenced his treatment of subject and theme."¹⁵ As a pedagogue, Woodruff was a formidable mentor according to Mark Richard Moss in his article, "Hayward L. Oubre: Wired-The Sculptor, Not the Magazine." Woodruff had taken under his wing a young budding artist, Hayward L. Oubre, while at Atlanta University. In an interview with Moss, Oubre says: "Atlanta was one of the best experiences I had, because I had two great teachers" of whom one was Woodruff.¹⁶

¹⁴ Hale Woodruff, interview by Albert Murray, August 1978, tape 1, John Hewitt Papers Schomburg Collection, New York.

¹⁵ Eugene Grigsby, Interview by Nacoleon Hillsman, Charlotte, NC, 2 February 2001.

¹⁶ Mark Richard Moss, *Hayward L. Oubre: Wired-The Sculptor, Not the Magazine*, American Visions (October/November 1997): 28.

Oubre says of Woodruff: “He was a master that studied with Diego Rivera in Mexico and he (Woodruff) was an extraordinarily good muralist.”¹⁷

By interacting with artists from other cultures, Woodruff gained valuable knowledge, which enabled him to recognize the influences and similarities of one culture upon another. These influences serve as a vital link or code that allows transcendence from the present into the historical past in an attempt to facilitate continued discovery of self and mental liberation. These influences in our human culture can be evidenced further by a New York gallery exhibition during the 1980s, according to Dr. Eugene Grigsby, of photos that featured the work studios of Picasso and Matisse.¹⁸ Prevalent in the studios of these artists were African sculptures and carvings prominently on display. This display of African sculptures in their work studios is further proof of the influence of African culture upon modern European artists. These African sculptures inspired Picasso, Matisse, and countless others to create masterpieces as yet unparalleled. Thus, the continued functionality and power of African sculpture is prevalent and dominant outside of its original geographical region.

Meanwhile, the Senate Avenue YMCA in Indianapolis continued to be Woodruff's home. Woodruff was membership secretary at the Senate Avenue YMCA from 1923 to 1927. Under the leadership of its “Chief,” Fayburn E. De Frantz, this YMCA became the outstanding black “Y” in the country. A man of vision and action, De Frantz brought men of cultural achievement to this Indianapolis community. Leading scholars including William Pickens, Charles S. Johnson, John Hope, Mordecai

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Eugene Grigsby, Interview by Nacoleon Hillsman, Charlotte, NC, 2 February 2001.

Johnson, Walter White, and W.E.B. Du Bois were invited to speak. Poets, artists, and musicians, likewise drew large crowds to the so-called “Monster Meetings” of Sunday afternoons. Here, Woodruff met Countee Cullen and William Edouard Scott. At this time De Frantz introduced Woodruff to Dr. John Hope, the President of Morehouse College. The Senate Avenue YMCA’s fostering of the arts was significant in the education of the young artist.¹⁹ It was also at one of these “Sunday Monster” meetings in the spring of 1927, where Woodruff met his second wife Theresa Barker a student at Washburn College. Her father had invited Fayburn De Frantz and Woodruff to the Barker home as part of a celebration of the membership drive. On Woodruff’s return to Indianapolis, he and Ted, as she was called, exchanged letters, marking the beginning of their courtship.²⁰ On June 14, 1934, Woodruff married Theresa Baker in her hometown of Topeka, Kansas. After their marriage she became a teacher at the Atlanta University Laboratory School.²¹ Woodruff’s first marriage to Elsie Mitchell in Greenfield, Indiana on January 24, 1926, ended eight months later on September 9, with the death of Elsie from tuberculosis.²²

Woodruff shared a small studio with Wilbert Holloway who also attended the Herron Art School. Holloway eventually left Indianapolis for a pictorial assignment with the *Pittsburgh Courier*. A second studio was set up with John Wesley Hardrick, a portrait painter. Both men, moonlighting for a living, shared the expenses of the

¹⁹ Winifred Stoelting, “The Atlanta Years: A Biographical Sketch” In *Hale Woodruff; Fifty Years of His Art* (New York: Studio Museum in Harlem), 10.

²⁰ Stoelting, 12.

²¹ Taylor and Warkel, 171.

²² Taylor and Warkel, 171.

evening work place. Hardrick was in the coal business and Woodruff continued to work at the Senate Avenue YMCA.²³ To supplement his income, Woodruff entered and exhibited his works at the local, regional and state sponsored competitions.

Woodruff became a regular exhibitor at the Indiana State Fairs where he almost always received some kind of award. He also entered his work in the YMCA shows. African-American artists were shown at the Indianapolis Museum, and when those opportunities presented themselves, Woodruff brought his paintings. During the years 1923, 1924, and 1926, his work was on display at the Herron Art Museum. In the year 1927, he exhibited paintings at the Art Institute of Chicago, but his greatest recognition had come the year before. In 1926, he won the Harmon Bronze Award for five paintings, four of which were landscapes.²⁴

The young Woodruff was now in distinguished company. The William E. Harmon Foundation gave honorable recognition to fourteen men and women for their creative work, which displayed outstanding character, by nominating and awarding them monetary prizes. The winners and honorees were Countee Cullen, poet; Palmer C. Hayden, painter; James Weldon Johnson, poet; Eric Walrond, short story writer; R. Nathaniel Dett, musical director; Laura Wheeling Waring, painter; J.W. Hardrick, portraitist, and William E. Scott, painter.²⁵ These awards were to inspire them to continue their creative works.

²³ Staelting, 12.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Taylor and Warkel, 171.

Woodruff won one hundred dollars for his entry in the exhibit, but more important to him was the recognition he received for his work. This acknowledgement was important state news as well. Governor Edward Jackson of Indiana pinned a medal on an ecstatic Woodruff. The Florentine Club of the town of Franklin honored Woodruff by presenting a play for the purpose of raising money for his trip to Europe. This group presented him with two hundred dollars.²⁶

Although Woodruff received funding from The Florentine Club, he still needed assistance with financing his trip to Europe. In an effort to assist young Woodruff with financing his studies in Europe, Walter White, then Assistant Executive Secretary of the NAACP, solicited Otto H. Kahn, American banker and patron of the arts, to contribute a small sum for each of the two years. Other small donations came from friends and neighbors, among them Herman Liber. In addition, Woodruff made an agreement with the Indianapolis art dealer who promised to sell at least one of his paintings a month. With these assurances, a \$150 third class ticket was purchased for travel on a French steamship to Europe. His plan was to spend two years in France, Italy, and Spain and to specialize in the painting of landscapes.²⁷

The French Experience

In September of 1927, Woodruff visited Paris, which was the fulfillment of his ambition. Woodruff's understanding and appreciation of art was greatly impacted by his visits to the museums. While in Paris, Woodruff met Palmer Hayden, a fellow artist with whom he shared the Harmon Award. Woodruff's goal was to receive

²⁶ Ibid. , 172.

²⁷ Ibid.

adequate instruction in his craft and a means by which to identify with the new modernism in art. During his first weeks, he visited the distinguished Academie Julien where Henry O. Tanner had studied. Woodruff discovered that this school, once famous for its excellent teaching, no longer carried so fine a reputation, for its teachers seldom met their students. Thus, he chose to attend two smaller schools: the Academie Scandinave and the Academie Moderne.²⁸ It would be three years before Woodruff would return to the United States. Woodruff lived in Paris for one year and the remaining two years were spent in the south of France.

While Woodruff was in Paris, his contemporary, Aaron Douglas was beginning to experience wide-spread appeal among the elite and intellectuals in New York. The recognition of this artist was made possible through the regularly featured “art” exposé in *The Crisis*, the official magazine of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. Even though many African Americans during the 1920s had little or no formal education, *The Crisis* kept them informed and supplied with photographs and illustrations of visual art created by, for, and about African Americans.

While in Europe, Woodruff became fascinated with African art form. European artists also sought to emulate the unique form exhibited in African sculpture. Europeans and even American artists were attempting to break free of the influence of naturalism, which manifested primarily in landscapes. These artists were searching for new modes of visual expression. For example, Tanner learned from his mentor, Rembrandt, the possibilities of expressing the elements of humanity and feeling in a painting. Tanner believed that the artists’ various views of humankind also helped him

²⁸ Ibid.

to see himself. Dr. Richard A. Long, associate of Hale Woodruff and Professor Emeritus of Interdisciplinary Studies at Emory University states: “In Europe, Woodruff became aware of currents of modernism, cubism, and African art. Hale had a consciousness about race during the Harlem Renaissance and this motivated him throughout his career.”²⁹

Woodruff met fellow artists to discuss and criticize the rapidly changing art scene. During these meetings the artists who identified themselves as “going modern” (theory and practice of modern art) formed sub groups. The term “going modern” was the expression given to those adventurous artists who painted outside the traditional styles of painting of the 1920s and 30s. Walter White, who annually visited Paris, encouraged Woodruff to experiment in the new modes.³⁰

Frequently, Woodruff saw African art in galleries and shops of Paris. On one occasion, he and Alain Locke traveled to the Marché aux Puces to search for sculptures. It was on this occasion that Woodruff acquired his first two pieces of African art. Both Woodruff and Locke recognized that the French modernists were seeking a unique form discovered in African sculpture. African sculpture provided not only symbolic form, but also served as an important reference point because its aesthetic value had already been validated due to its influence on European modernism and because the scholarly advancement in the fields of cultural anthropology and archaeology had established its cultural significance.

²⁹ Richard Long, Interview by Nacoleon Hillsman, Atlanta, GA, 25 September 2001.

³⁰ Hale Woodruff, interview by Albert Murray, August 1978, tape 1, John Hewitt Papers Schomburg Collection, New York.

Another fellow artist with whom Woodruff met frequently to discuss and criticize the rapidly changing art scene was Palmer Hayden. Their plan was to rent and share a small studio in Montparnesse; however, their search to find a small, reasonably priced studio was fruitless. In the spring of 1928, Woodruff, along with three Americans, Forrest Wiggins, Charles Law, and Robert Miller discovered a small house to share in Malakoff-sur-Seine, a suburb of Paris, and a community easily reached by streetcar. Woodruff had his own facilities and the shared rent was eight dollars a month.³¹

Before Woodruff returned to the United States, Miss Morehouse, of *The Indianapolis Star*, invited him to write a number of descriptive articles about the art scene in France. Subsequently, beginning in the fall of 1927 and continuing through 1928, he made notes on familiar historical and artistic places of interest. He sketched and painted a number of these scenes. The articles first appeared in *The Star* in January of 1928 and continued as bi-monthly features for fourteen months. To fulfill his assignment, Woodruff visited the gardens of Luxembourg, the Village of Meudon with its Rodin studio, the old bridges of Paris, Notre Dame, the home of Joan of Arc in Orleans, the Gardens of the Tuileries (in which the Jeu de Paume Museum and the Orangerie are located), the old bookstalls of the Seine, St. Julien-le-Pauvre (an ancient church), and Montparnesse, the hub of the art world.³² Woodruff received ten dollars for each article.

³¹ Stoelting, 13.

³² Richard Long, Interview by Nacoleon Hillsman, Atlanta, GA, 25 September 2001.

In addition to visiting these landmarks, Woodruff had planned to visit the great painter Henry Ossawa Tanner. Now in Paris, Woodruff was unsure of his welcome, for he had not received an answer to the letter he had sent earlier to the artist. Yet, determined to meet Tanner, Woodruff traveled in the winter of 1928 to find the semi-retired artist living in Etaples, a small town in Normandy. Arriving at Tanner's front door the next morning, the elderly artist realized Woodruff was somehow different from the many tourists who bothered him when he lived in Paris. Maybe it was the intensity of Woodruff's expression and the portfolio he carried on his side that caused the artist to be congenial and invite young Woodruff inside. Seemingly abrupt at first, Tanner questioned Woodruff about the American art scene and Woodruff's own purposes. The elder artist criticized the newer modernism and felt Americans were still too bound to the Paris scene. Woodruff countered gently with his own belief that younger Americans were not imitating but searching for new means of visual expression.³³

Through Tanner, Woodruff learned a critical factor that must be present for art to be successful and appreciated: the promotion of theme and subject. Tanner suggested that Woodruff begin incorporating human subjects onto the canvas. Up to this point, Woodruff's paintings had consisted mainly of landscapes. Having experimented in many genres, Woodruff was eager to embrace Tanner's suggestion. Seeing Woodruff's drawings of landscapes devoid of human figure, Tanner spoke of the importance of the human form in all art. He believed that the artists' various views of humankind helped the observer to see himself. He also spoke of his mentor, Rembrandt, who had taught

³³ Stoelting, 13.

him the valuable lessons of order and structure. But more importantly, Rembrandt's paintings had pointed to the possibilities of expressing the elements of humanity and feeling in a painting. This concept he carefully conveyed to Woodruff.

At the conclusion of their visit, the conversation shifted to the subject of working conditions of African-American artists in the United States. Woodruff reported that the Negro artist in the United States still faced the same problem as Tanner before he left – general discrimination in housing, jobs and education – but that it was the artists' hope that he could raise himself above it – that he should be judged as a man and artist and nothing else.³⁴ Tanner had a profound influence on Woodruff during his visit and the latter incorporated the suggestions of utilizing human figures in his landscapes throughout his career.

In the months that followed, Woodruff made a number of trips to Luxembourg to examine Tanner's masterpiece, *The Raising of Lazarus*. Woodruff sought the elder artist's paintings, for he was convinced that Tanner was the greatest African-American painter of his time. In his later years, Tanner appeared dignified in his pain and profound in his understanding of the social conditions of blacks, and he became to Woodruff a symbol of nobility in the arts.

Following the instructions of Tanner, young Woodruff recognized the importance of translating, and, more importantly, documenting events and contributions of Africans in the Diaspora on canvas. Similar to the intellectuals before him, Woodruff utilized visual icons that represented the accomplishments and achievements of his people. More significantly, Woodruff sought to impress these icons upon the

³⁴ Ibid.

minds of young African Americans with the intent of psychologically liberating an enslaved culture and re-connecting the people to their heritage and forgotten ancestral traditions. In this stratum, he would then have to represent visually the accomplishments and achievements of the African and African American and their cultural influences globally. It was not the master's work, but the image of Henry O. Tanner as a man, artist, and scholar that would remain for Woodruff, the most enduring aspect of this memorable meeting.³⁵

Although influenced by Tanner, Woodruff did not look to the great African-American painter's style for artistic inspiration, rather he focused on the innovative technique of Paul Cézanne for creative ideas about what to paint. Woodruff admired the French artist's sense of structure, use of distortion, elimination of conventional perspective, and the expressive quality of his color.³⁶ Cézanne's influence is readily recognizable in Woodruff's Parisian landscapes. Woodruff says this about the importance of Cézanne:

[He] opened new doors for me . . . I set about trying to find a means by which I could learn from these examples, not to simply paraphrase them and copy them. . . I understood why Cézanne tilted the tops of his table, how he brought things forward, how he eliminated so-called optical perspective and used space as surface construction.³⁷

Woodruff was aware of the challenging atmosphere that was changing the arts, both abroad and in the United States. The leading African-American scholars were both followers and patrons of the arts and they encouraged younger artists. W.E.B. Du Bois,

³⁵ Taylor and Warkel, 60.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

editor of *The Crisis*; Benjamin Brawley, literary critic; Chandler Owen, editor of *The Messenger*; Alain Locke, Professor of Philosophy at Howard University; Walter White, Executive Secretary of the NAACP; and Charles S. Johnson, sociologist and editor of *Opportunity*, all wrote articles on the arts. In music, Paul Robeson and Marian Anderson were singing to both black and white audiences. In literature, Claude McKay, Countee Cullen, and Eric Walrond were finding an audience in the United States and abroad. Woodruff saw this period as an awakening and blossoming of new promises for African Americans in the arts during the twenties.³⁸

Occasionally, Woodruff met Eric Walrond, Claude McKay, Countee Cullen, and Augusta Savage to discuss art along with the social and political events that were affecting Blacks in the United States and abroad. Of all, he was closest to Cullen, whose portrait he painted in the States in 1926. A good friend, the poet influenced a number of people to buy Woodruff's paintings.³⁹

The early months of 1929 were difficult for Woodruff. In Europe, living on a tight budget, he had hoped to qualify for a scholarship from the Julius Rosenwald Foundation. However, he did not receive one.⁴⁰ Worse still, the friends with whom he had shared the little house were now gone. Unable to secure work because he was not a French citizen, he found it both impossible to pay rent and to find buyers for his paintings in the depressed economy. He experienced great discomfort and even

³⁸ Stoelting, 14.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

hunger.⁴¹ Desperate for funds, Woodruff stopped at the American Express office and learned that a two hundred dollar check had been delivered to him several weeks prior. The two hundred dollar check was the result of paintings Woodruff left with Walter White, Secretary of the NAACP. Upon selling these paintings, White immediately wired the funds to Woodruff. He paid off his debts, and the following morning took the train to Cagnes-sur-Mer, a small town on the Mediterranean. His decision to go to southern France had been prompted by a number of ideas. William H. Johnson, a painter whose earlier works he admired, had lived and painted there, and, further, Cagnes-sur-Mer had been the home of Chaim Soutine and Auguste Renoir. The work of Chaim Soutine, an early proponent of modernism, known for his free, expressionist brushwork, may have also inspired Woodruff. While in Cagnes-sur-Mer, Woodruff lived in Soutine's old studio, and though he felt the impact of Soutine's great work, Woodruff claimed, "I never succumbed to it."⁴² Instead, exposure to European art encouraged Woodruff to experiment with a wide variety of motifs and styles, eventually motivating him to pursue and create his own abstract modes of expression. He saw Cagnes-sur-Mer as a beautiful place built on low-lying hills overlooking the sea and a serene countryside. He was impressed and temporarily rented a large room with a cooking stove. This would serve his needs while he searched for work.⁴³ After living over a year and a half in and near Paris, Woodruff believed that he had seen enough of

⁴¹ Hale Woodruff, Interview by Albert Murray, August 1978, tape 1, John Hewitt Papers Schomburg Collection, New York.

⁴² Stoelting, 14.

⁴³ Hale Woodruff, Interview by Albert Murray, August 1978, tape 1, John Hewitt Papers Schomburg Collection, New York.

that part of France. Yet, truthfully, his move was hastened by his financial need to find a less expensive area in which to live.⁴⁴

When the Depression spread in the fall of 1929, Woodruff was worried and believed that he should return to the states; however, this would be difficult because he did not have the fare for his passage. With money so scarce in the American economy, he could not count on further sales of his paintings; nor had the dealer in Indianapolis sold any of the paintings in his possession. Nonetheless, Woodruff, using the money he had, shipped to the Harmon Foundation five paintings he had completed while in Paris: *The Banjo Player*, *Washer Women*, *Old Woman Peeling Apples*, *Old Street, Paris*, and *Bridge Near Avalon, Paris*. These would appear in January at the Harmon Foundation's exhibit in New York.⁴⁵

Finding work seemed a formidable task. Having no worker's permit, Woodruff decided to pass himself off as a North African. Under this disguise, he obtained a job as a road laborer, earning a \$1.30 per day. To his surprise, Woodruff did not find the job of shoveling and moving rocks as hard as it might seem. The crew was given mid-morning, noon and mid-afternoon breaks, which provided enough rest for Woodruff to endure the labor. Actually, he enjoyed the company of the laborers. Like them, he carried on his back a sack containing a bottle of wine, a chunk of bread, and a piece of cheese – his food for the entire workday. This daily work was to prove his mainstay for several months.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Ibid. , 15.

⁴⁵ Stoelting, 14.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

In the fall of 1930, he sent four oil paintings to the Harmon Foundation for its exhibit in February: *The Card Players*, *Head of a Woman*, *Provencel Landscape*, and *Still Life*. While in the south of France, Woodruff met the American painter, Hilaire Hilar. Woodruff found a close friend in Hilaire Hilar, and together they explored and painted the countryside. He heartily agreed with Hilar's description of their surroundings in Cagnes-sur-Mer as the garden spot of the world. Woodruff's painting, *Landscape near Cagnes-sur-Mer, France*, completed in 1931, represents his deep commitment to the beauty he found there. This landscape overlooks the hills from the village.⁴⁷

The spontaneity of living in southern France delighted the young Woodruff. He wore sandals, frequently dipped in the ocean, and grew a beard. But more importantly he gained insight about his own creative direction. In Paris and now in Cagnes, he gathered wonderful experiences that could not be found any place else. Yet, the artist knew he could not continue to live in France, for when the roadwork terminated, he would find himself in dire straits again. Others eventually discovered his distress. Walter White received a letter from Nathan W. Levin, then comptroller of the Rosenwald Fund. Levin had visited Woodruff in Cagnes and spoke in his letter of the artist's situation. White began to sell Woodruff's paintings in the United States, and in April 1931, wrote to Harold Jackman (collector, patron of the arts, and a friend of Cullen and Carl Van Vechten) to solicit his help. Woodruff's oil paintings were selling for seventy-five dollars each. It was hoped that buyers would be found for the four

⁴⁷ Ibid.

watercolors the Harmon Foundation retained. The asking price for these was twenty-five dollars per painting.⁴⁸

In the summer of 1931, Dr. Hope, then president of Atlanta University, heard from his long time friend Fayburn De Frantz, that Woodruff still faced difficulties. Hope, an annual visitor to France, had seen the young artist's work in Paris. Even earlier in Indianapolis, when Hope was President of Morehouse College, he had suggested that the young artist consider a position at Atlanta University upon his return to the United States. Again that summer he pressed Woodruff to consider a teaching position. Woodruff finally agreed.

Woodruff (fig. 2-1) left Europe and went to Atlanta University to teach at the Laboratory High School in Atlanta for teacher training. After his return from Europe, Woodruff was appointed by Dr. Hope, as a faculty member on the Atlanta University staff to teach the fundamentals and principles of fine art. His teaching salary was small, so, like most artists, he looked for additional ways to supplement his income. Classes were held in two basement rooms of Laura Spelman Hall, and all activities in the form of studio art were conducted congruently.⁴⁹ Hale Woodruff, the only faculty member in the art department, was a virtual "one" man [college] department. When the Laboratory School closed, Spelman College took over the services of Woodruff and he was added to their payroll.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Hale Woodruff, Interview by Albert Murray, August 1978, tape 1, John Hewitt Papers Schomburg Collection, New York.

⁴⁹ Stoelting, 17.

⁵⁰ Hale Woodruff, interview by Albert Murray, August 1978, tape 1, John Hewitt Papers Schomburg Collection, New York, 13.

The Mexican Experience

In July 1934, Woodruff received a General Education Board Scholarship to study native Mexican art and architecture for six weeks.⁵¹ Woodruff left for Mexico where he visited Diego Rivera, the renowned socialist painter and muralist. Explaining his desire to learn the technique of fresco painting, Woodruff asked Rivera for his tutelage during his six-week visit. Rivera agreed and put him to work preparing walls. The experience provided Woodruff with thoughts, ideas, and techniques from one of the masters in fresco painting. He began to realize particular elements within Rivera's painting that made his statements more than just historical illustration or protest art. He began to understand that the key to a successful protest painting required a certain amount of "artistic distance." Woodruff was to later remark, "You've got to get away from your subject and then come to it in your own terms."⁵² By adopting the "artistic distance" technique, Woodruff was able to transfer emotionally similar events or experiences in his own reality to the canvas.

The influences from Woodruff's French and Mexican experiences are evidenced in his treatment of primary colors, fluid form, and impressionistic style.

⁵¹ Gaither, 175.

⁵² Coker, 60.



Fig. 2-1. A young Hale Woodruff, circa 1932. *Source:* Amistad Research Center, New Orleans, LA

Relying on the hard edge and clear, bright color typical of Midwestern regionalists and compositional ideas inspired by the Mexican tradition, Woodruff was triumphant in assimilating a vast amount of data and reworking it into a coherent statement.⁵³

Although Woodruff spent only six weeks working with Rivera, Rivera's influence was

⁵³ Gaither, 134.

profound and is evidenced in Woodruff's brushstrokes. This style of painting would remain with Woodruff throughout his career and as a Works Progress Administration (WPA) artist.

Armed with the WPA commissions, many African-American artists began to paint their interpretations of American history. Among the muralists were Charles Alston, Aaron Douglas, Charles White, Archibald Motley, and Hale Woodruff. Their subject matter usually included scenes from African-American life and history. It has been suggested by African-American art historians that, collectively the murals of these artists would relay the complete history of African-American people in the United States.⁵⁴

Even in Woodruff's task as a WPA artist, the Mexican muralist Diego Rivera still influenced him. After the Mexican Revolution, a group of artists began creating murals to carry forward the ideals of the revolution and the new society. Artists were employed by the Mexican government to paint frescoes in public buildings for which they earned laborers' wages. These Mexican artists felt that art had to be public in the sense of rousing the people. It was this sense of energy and nationalism that influenced artists in the United States, particularly since in the 1930s there was a growing rejection of abstract painting. As the anti-abstract schools developed, new images of didactic social statements emerged. Rivera, one of the engineers of the art movement in Mexico, had studied art in Europe where he became acquainted with the frescoes of the Italian Renaissance.

⁵⁴ Gylbert Coker, "Art as History and Epic: The Murals." In *Hale Woodruff: Fifty Years of His Art* (New York: Studio Museum in Harlem, 1979), 59.

The tradition of fresco painting had been thoroughly established in Venice as an activity, which was practiced outside the city. In fact, the eighteenth century proved to be the great age of fresco decoration in Northern Italy, especially in Venice and Veneto, but the phenomenon is personified by and almost inspired by Giovanni Battista Tiepolo to such an extent that it is hard to gauge what it would have been like without him.⁵⁵ His drawings and his oil paintings revealed his talent, but already he had mastered another medium, fresco painting, where his gifts were to blaze forth supremely, outshining all competitors, to make him the undisputed sovereign of that realm.⁵⁶

Fascinated by this style of art, Rivera began to translate its elements into an art form that was large enough and powerful enough to expose the raw energies of a young and vocal nation. Covering wall after wall with his images, Rivera established an internationally-recognized school of Mexican painting. Several years later while traveling through the United States, Rivera became impressed with the brisk attitudes of the Americans, which was a direct result of the industrial revolution and the mechanization with which they worked.⁵⁷

Woodruff, like so many other artists, was determined to make a strong social statement and was deeply inspired by what he saw of the power in mural painting. It was his hope that once African Americans understood their role in the cultural history

⁵⁵ Antonio Morassi, *G.B. Tiepolo His Life and His Works* (London: Phaidon Press, 1955), 20.

⁵⁶ Michael Levy, *Giambattista Tiepolo* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 21.

⁵⁷ Coker, 60.

of the world, they would be filled with the desire to go in search of more information about their past and would therefore gain the joy and appreciation of all art.⁵⁸

Woodruff understood the importance of two factors in the professional life of a committed African-American artist: (1) that knowledge of self was the key to liberation, and (2) that effective mentoring was critical in transferring knowledge of the self to future African-American artists. In his opinion, those who have a strong foundation in self-knowledge maintain considerable enthusiasm for acquiring even greater knowledge. Knowing self is the power of psychological, economic, political, and social effectiveness.⁵⁹

The racism and segregation Woodruff felt stems back to his birth. Hence, his determination to paint African-American history on canvas is quite logical. First, Woodruff was separated from his biological father before birth, and secondly, the racism he experienced from the people in the southern cities where he was reared proved fertile soil for an artistic mind. As a result of the segregation and racism he experienced as a child, Woodruff was passionate about painting the murals which link himself and the African-American culture to its African roots. Later, Woodruff would comment on the lack of recognition from his colleagues of his most celebrated mural, *Art of the Negro*.

Before the mural *Art of the Negro*, Woodruff painted seven other murals. In chapter three, *The Early Years*, Woodruff's first four murals are chronicled and the reader can observe where Woodruff has painted himself into Panel II of the *Amistad*

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Coker, 60.

(fig. 4-6, p. 76). This is his last plea to be placed permanently in the historical canon.

Woodruff identified early with African art and this complex identification became a life long concern. The works produced are reflective of his “dual consciousness” as an African and an American, which W.E.B. Du Bois, a patron and colleague spoke of in his seminal work, *The Souls of Black Folk*, (1903)⁶⁰. Two murals, *The Art of the Negro* and *The Negro in California History: Settlement and Development Panel II*, show global contributions and influences of African peoples and Woodruff’s commitment to the transformation of African-American life.

⁶⁰ W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Chicago: A.C. McClurg and Company, 1903).

CHAPTER THREE

THE ATLANTA UNIVERSITY YEARS

The public is anxious to see a black image, but, whenever you label an artist or categorize what he is doing, you are in trouble. The totality of a culture makes an art form. You must be careful not to say 'This is black art and this is unique.' It is the essential art quality that must be most important.¹

Hale Woodruff

The Laboratory School

The majority of the 12 million Negroes in the United States lived in the deep south during the early 1900s. However, in this region of the country there was not one comprehensive school of the arts to which Negroes were admitted, not a first class art gallery to which Negroes had access either as students or visitors, not a theatre in which they could demonstrate their inherent dramatic abilities under competent direction, and not a symphony orchestra with which the highly talented could play and to which the rank and file could listen.²

Dr. John Hope, ninth President of Atlanta University (1929-1936), envisioned a six-year plan for the institution that would not only enhance the curriculum offerings, but accelerate the cultural enrichment of the African-American community, particularly in

¹ Edmund Gaither, *A Shared Heritage: Art by Four African Americans* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996), 171.

² John Hope, Manuscript and Papers, 1936, Box 168, Special Collections, Robert W. Woodruff Library, Clark Atlanta University, Atlanta.

the South. This expansion of course offerings would include Recreation (Physical Education), Music, Fine Arts, and Law. In 1929, Dr. Hope discussed with colleagues his desire to develop a department or school of fine arts. At the time according to Dr. Hope, there was no such department or school in any black institution, which catered to the yearnings of a visual artist.³ The plan included the assembly and development of work in painting, sculpture, music, and drama. The School of Arts at Atlanta University would serve a four-fold purpose: (1) to offer students the opportunity to obtain general knowledge and sound appreciation of the arts through college courses, lectures, art exhibitions, concerts, and dramatic performances; (2) to train public school teachers of music, art, and drama; (3) to afford exceptional young Negroes training for a career in a chosen field of the arts and to encourage self-expression in them; and (4) finally, the school would furnish the general public, through extension classes for non-credit, adult education projects, public lectures, concerts, and art exhibitions, the occasion and opportunity to become better acquainted with the best fine arts has to offer. The cultural enrichment of the African-American, Hope believed would, therefore, be enhanced through more productive use of leisure. The School would consist of three major divisions – Music, Fine Arts, and Drama – and would offer work on four levels: (1) University work would be offered to advanced students seeking a certificate of proficiency; (2) College work in music, painting, sculpture and dramatics would be offered to the students of Spelman and Morehouse Colleges and a Bachelor of Arts or Bachelor of Science would be offered in the department; and (3) in the elementary and

³ John Hope, Manuscript and Papers, *The Six Year Plan*, Box 168, Special Collections, Robert W. Woodruff Library, Clark Atlanta University, Atlanta.

secondary grades of Atlanta University Laboratory School the work in music, painting, modeling and drama would be directed by the faculty of the school. Through classes and lectures, for which no academic credit would be given, the adult population of the University system would be reached.

The Division of Fine Arts would offer classroom instruction in theory, history, and appreciation of art, and studio courses in drawing, painting and sculpture. Attention would be paid to; (1) the dissemination of a general knowledge and understanding of art forms among students and the general public; (2) the training of teachers who plan to teach in the public schools; and (3) the encouragement and assistance of specially talented students in the development of their own creative abilities. Members of the faculty would also conduct classroom work in art in the laboratory school, be responsible for the adult education or extension work in the fine arts, and supervise the holding of frequent public exhibitions of art. This program would require a minimum of at least three persons: a teacher of creative art, particularly in the field of painting and sculpture, a teacher of public school art methods, who would supervise the work of the laboratory school, and an instructor in applied art.⁴

Dr. Hope envisioned Atlanta University as a Center of Negro Art. Atlanta was the logical location for the School of Fine Arts because of its geographical location in relation to the other Negro institutions. Seven schools would utilize this facility: Atlanta University (co-ed), Morehouse College for men, Spelman College for women, Morris Brown College (co-ed), Clark University (co-ed), Gammon Theological Seminary and

⁴ Ibid.

the Atlanta School of Social Work.⁵ Because of the many agencies for cultural development initiated in Atlanta, Dr. Hope believed this Southern city was particularly suited to house and develop an academic center of Negro Art.

Dr. Hope proposed that the School of Fine Arts be part of Atlanta University. In 1929, Atlanta University began its affiliation with Morehouse and Spelman Colleges and worked towards the development of a genuine university system while seeking to achieve a closer union with the other Negro institutions in Atlanta. A long step was taken toward this goal with the opening of the Atlanta University library to students from other Negro colleges in Atlanta and by the organization of a unified summer session, in which all Negro institutions in the city would cooperate. In the same spirit, the School of the Arts would allow qualified students from other colleges to enroll for work in music, fine arts, and drama. Under such a plan, the scope and utility of the school would be greatly widened.

The staff of the University Laboratory School consisted of one teacher of music, one teacher of fine arts – Hale Woodruff – a nationally-known Negro painter, and one teacher in the industrial arts who gave instruction in mechanical art drawing and manual training. The Fine Arts program was designed to seek self-expression from students, while stressing the importance of revealing the life, characteristics, strivings, and hopes of Negroes. Under Woodruff's guidance (fig. 3-1, p. 44) students would be taught two courses, which were listed in the Morehouse College catalog, 1931-32:

201-202 Art Appreciation, Drawing and Painting- A study in art, its developments and schools, from the earliest stages to the present day; emphasizing its influence on contemporary art; modern movements in art; contemporary painters and sculptors; principles of composition

⁵ Ibid.

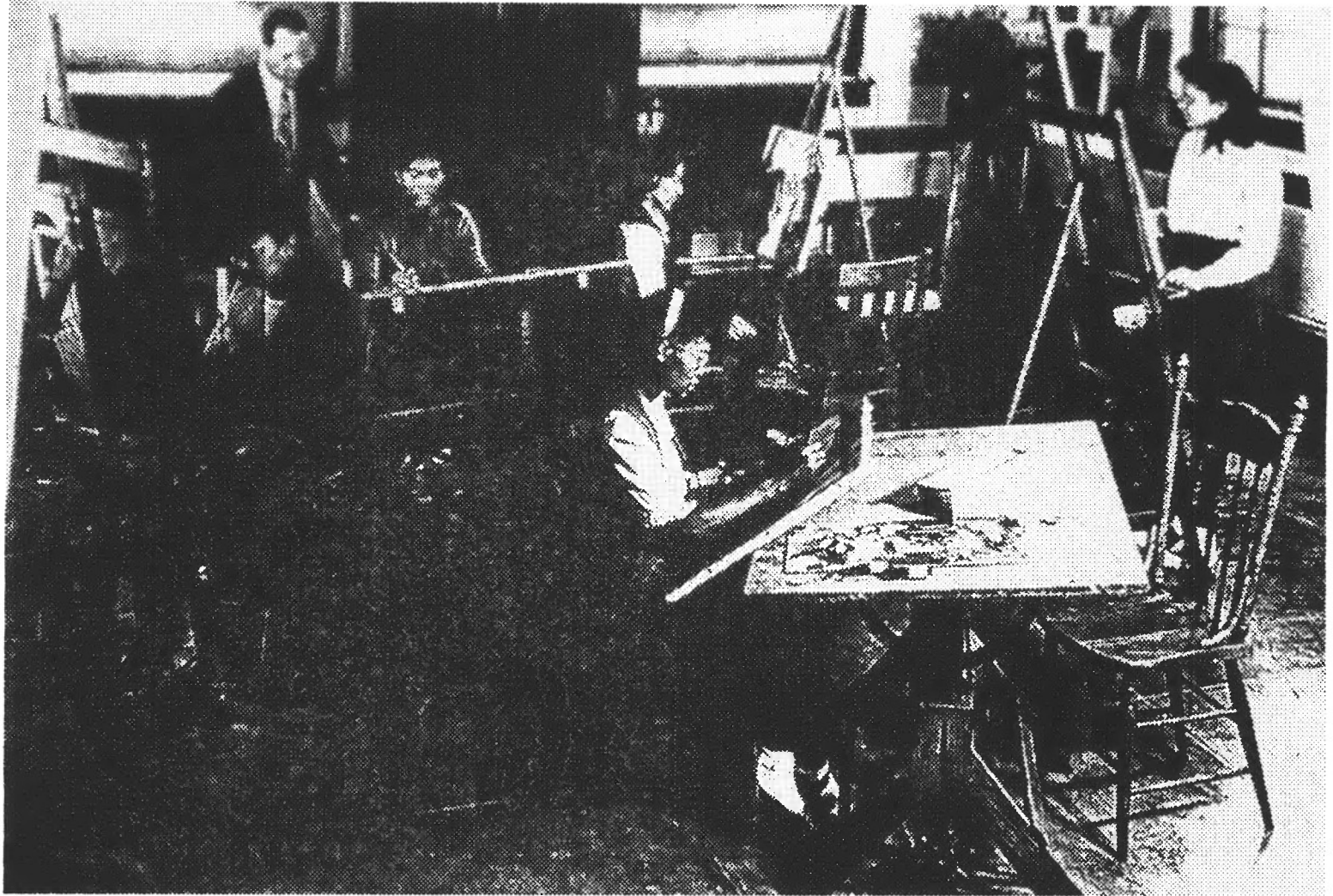


Fig. 3-1. Woodruff instructing art students at Atlanta University. *Source:* Amistad Research Center, New Orleans, LA.

and picture making, with attention given to balance, mass, line, form and color; modeling, drawing, sketching, and painting. Six hours.

205-206 Advanced Painting and Composition- A study of the elements and fundamentals of picture construction, including color, rhythm, unity, and harmony;

In 1933, a significant gift was given by the Carnegie Corporation to the Atlanta University Center library of 5000 photographic reproductions of paintings, sculpture, and architecture. These offered a wealth of materials for exhibition and student study. In the spring of that year, Woodruff added a course in art appreciation:

301 Art Appreciation (special course) – A series of illustrated lectures gallery talks and discussions covering a period of six weeks. Special slides, photographs, prints, reproductions, books and exhibits of paintings and sculptures are available for the course. Two hours.⁶

Undergraduate students from Spelman and Morehouse Colleges would come under Woodruff's guidance in art instruction. Classes were held in two basement rooms of Laura Spelman Hall and all activities in the form of studio art were conducted together. Prior to Woodruff's arrival at The Laboratory School in Atlanta, courses in the crafts had been offered, but he introduced the fine arts. This was the first time students would receive instruction in drawing and painting.⁷ Since the classes were small, the relationship between Woodruff and his students was probably informal. Students were encouraged to move freely to use the classroom at all hours. Woodruff's studio adjoined

⁶ Winifred Stoelting, "The Atlanta Years: A Biographical Sketch" In *Hale Woodruff; Fifty Years of His Art* (New York: Studio Museum in Harlem, 1979), 17.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 18.

his classroom. There, the students had the opportunity to observe a master at work.

The volume and diversity of Woodruff's own art encouraged students to be creative.⁸

Offerings in art were broadened when Miss Nancy Elizabeth Prophet, a sculptress of considerable reputation, joined the faculty in 1934. She held her classes in the old power plant building that had been converted because it had a skylight. The skylight allowed natural light to filter abundantly into the studio, creating an optimal condition for painting and sculpting. To have two artists teaching at the Center was a significant development in the arts program on campus. Hallie Beachem Brooks, then librarian of the Laboratory School, spoke about this time: "You must always remember that Dr. Hope and Miss Read made it possible. If you think back to what this University was – how small it was in 1931 – to introduce this art curriculum and emphasize it was innovative. Hale Woodruff did get a lot of support in those years."⁹

In 1934, Woodruff added Advanced Painting and Composition and, in 1935, Intermediate Painting and Composition. In this course, particular stress was placed on "the individual tendencies and talents of the student."¹⁰ At this point, graphic arts is introduced for the first time to the schools curriculum. Miss Prophet's new courses included (clay) Modeling, and History of Art and Architecture.¹¹

Later, the scope of art was widened considerably by the offerings of visiting exhibitions. Because students had little contact with the outside art world, Woodruff

⁸ Ibid. , 18.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Hale Woodruff, interview by Albert Murray, August 1978, tape 1, John Hewitt Papers Schomburg Collection, New York.

¹¹ Stoelting, 19.

brought many exhibits to the campus. The exhibition hall of the Atlanta University Library continuously displayed works of art. In 1934, during the traditional Negro History Week, the work of ten outstanding Negro artists was exhibited. Later, one hundred thirty photographs of painting and sculpture by fifty-four black artists, all of whom had exhibited in the Harmon Foundation exhibitions, were on display. One-man shows of Woodruff and Allan Freelon, a black artist from Philadelphia, were held. During Commencement Week, the annual show of the work of students was hung. Again in 1935, the Harmon Foundation sent its exhibit by Negro artists to the campus of Spelman College. This exhibit helped to bridge a wide gulf in two respects: (1) these shows enlightened the Atlanta Community and (2) they provided encouragement to the young artists at a critical time. The exhibit during this year included works by twenty-eight leading artists, the work of Woodruff and two of his students, Curtis Cage (Morehouse College '33) and Wilmer Jennings.¹² The loan of twenty-five paintings from the Whitney Museum of American Art was opened to the Atlanta community in the exhibition hall. George Bellows, Leon Kroll, Eugene Speicher, Reginald Marsh, Glenn Coleman, Georgia O'Keefe, and a number of other contemporaries painted the oils on canvas.¹³

¹² Winifred Stoelting, *Hale Woodruff: Artist and Teacher, Through the Georgia Years* (Ph.D. diss., Emory University, 1978), 16.

¹³ *Ibid.*

A significant show was a collection of paintings by Henry O. Tanner and E. M. Bannister loaned to the University through the courtesy of Mr. J. J. Haverty, Atlanta businessman and art collector, and President John Hope. Included in the 1935 exhibition were Tanner's, *Sodom and Gomorrah*, *Good Shepherd*, *Flight into Egypt*, and *The Road to Emmaus*. William Bannister was represented by his works *New England Farm* and *The Hulk*. Paintings by W.E. Scott, Palmer Hayden, and Woodruff were also displayed.

To encourage student visitation at the exhibits, Woodruff regularly lectured on the artist renderings that were included in the exhibit. These talks became popular art lessons and often included instruction on the art of printmaking, beginning with the fifteenth century. As a result of this lecture, Woodruff was extended a special note of appreciation in the Spelman bulletin.¹⁴ Woodruff encouraged the practice of inter-loan policy with other institutions because students were unable to travel to see other exhibitions due to financial constraints and because the galleries were segregated.

The "Outhouse" School

Atlanta University was surrounded during the 1930s by dilapidated buildings and houses. Part of Woodruff's work at the time consisted of painting the red clay impoverished hills and farms of the Georgia countryside and the lowly rickety neighborhoods around the campuses. Occasionally he brought students to these places for sketching. In 1935, Woodruff organized his students into a group, the Painter's Guild, to encourage their creativity and to enhance their identity. The Harmon exhibition catalog for that year noted that some of their best work had been done in black and white

¹⁴ Winifred Stoelting, "The Atlanta Years: A Biographical Sketch" In *Hale Woodruff; Fifty Years of His Art* (New York: Studio Museum in Harlem, 1979), 17.

prints, including an illustration titled *De Good Book Says* by artist Wilmer Jennings, a student of Woodruff.

By the mid-thirties, Spelman College, Morehouse College, and Atlanta University had become the regional center for aspiring art students. This was largely due to segregation laws governing southern and border states, causing African-American students to turn to the Atlanta University Center as a solution for their higher education. Although a graduate program was not offered in art at Atlanta University, students came because they desired to work under Hale Woodruff.¹⁵ Only through the continuing efforts of Woodruff were the doors to the Atlanta Museum opened to the students of the Atlanta Center. His students were often placed in professional positions after their graduation. A 1940 University report records that art graduates had filled sixteen teaching posts in colleges and schools. They had all applied with excellent recommendations. On eleven occasions, individuals of this group had won prizes or awards in national exhibitions.¹⁶

This group of students would not have received an education in the arts without the financial assistance of the University in the form of scholarships, teaching assistantships, and work-study aid under the National Youth Administration. Despite their serious financial difficulties, however, the morale of the students remained high. The subject matter of the students' work reflected the African American in the Southern setting. Woodruff spoke at that time for himself and his students when he said to a *Time*

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Edmund Gaither, *A Shared Heritage: Art by Four African Americans* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996), 171.

reporter: “We are interested in expressing the South as a field, as a territory; its peculiar rundown landscapes, its social and economic problems, and [its] Negro people.”¹⁷

Woodruff also states:

The group of students and I . . . used to talk about these problems. Not only talked about them, we experienced them. . . In Locke’s, *The Negro in Art*. . . you’ll see their work reflects our interest in the Negro sociological theme, or scene.¹⁸

The year 1940 marked the eighth session of the Atlanta University Summer School, which attracted the largest enrollment in history. One of its offerings was the Arts and Crafts Workshop directed by Woodruff, assisted by Miss Elaine Hill Snowden and Mrs. Mary Tobias Dean. Planned particularly to demonstrate to teachers of arts and crafts the media and techniques available in schools having small funds and limited equipment, its emphasis was on teaching methods rather than on the development of talent.¹⁹

By 1940-1941, a major in art with a total of 24 credits could be earned in the Art Department of Spelman College. The offerings in the fall semester included *202 - Drawing and Painting*, *302 - Intermediate Painting and Composition*, *402 - Advanced Painting and Composition*; Miss Prophet taught *212 - Modeling*. In addition to these classes she also taught *214 - History of Art and Architecture*, while Woodruff lectured in *102 - Introduction to the Field of Fine Arts*. In the Spring, *206 - Drawing and Painting*, taught by Woodruff, was added. In the Fall of 1941, a new course, *307 – 308 Decorative*

¹⁷ Winifred Stoelting, “The Atlanta Years: A Biographical Sketch” In *Hale Woodruff; Fifty Years of His Art* (New York: Studio Museum in Harlem, 1979), 17.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* , 19.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

Design was offered by Miss Prophet.²⁰ The Art Department was now flourishing both with students and course offerings, which allowed Woodruff to add another component to the art department – The Atlanta University Annuals.

The Atlanta University Annuals

Hale Woodruff conceived the idea for an annual art show on the campus of Atlanta University. Charles Alston, a close friend and contemporary, encouraged Woodruff to carry out his idea for a national show that would give exposure to art students and enlighten the community about art while simultaneously creating a permanent art collection for the University. During this same period the United States had embarked upon another World War, which required the registration of all eligible males regardless of race. This created a shortage of male students at the university.

With the outbreak of World War II, certain departments lost all of their male students. Consequently, enrollment was cut in the art department between 1941 and 1945. It seemed as though no funds were available to award prizes to the winners of the annuals. However, through Dr. Rufus Clement, Atlanta University President, Woodruff received a few hundred dollars from the Trustees of the University for this purpose. In addition to the contributions from the Trustees, Woodruff solicited different institutions and businesses in Atlanta and picked up small contributions. In an effort to solicit participation from artists, notices were placed in Negro presses throughout the country. Atlanta University carried this notice in the December 1941 issue of *Phylon*:

To encourage Negro artists, Atlanta University is sponsoring an exhibition of

²⁰ Hale Woodruff, Interview by Albert Murray, August 1978, tape 1, John Hewitt Papers Schomburg Collection, New York.

painting in oil and water color, to be held on the campus in the late spring, April 19 – May 3. Artists who enter this competitive exhibition will have an opportunity to win one of five handsome awards. Not only will this effort be an encouragement to Negro artists, but it will also be an opportunity to bring to light the best work by leading Negro artists of the day, and a means of discovering latent talent among certain undiscovered artists. This is to be an annual exhibition sponsored by the University. It is the hope of Atlanta University that artists who win awards may some day be as acclaimed as the late Henry O. Tanner . . . ²¹

As an indication of its continuing interest, the Harmon Foundation, which had built up the largest collection of African-American art in the 1930s, provided the first substantial prize in the Atlanta University exhibit – \$250 to be known as the John Hope Award. Atlanta University offered four other prizes in the amounts of \$100, \$75, \$50, and \$25. The ads garnered a tremendous response and numerous potential exhibitors sent their works for the show. Woodruff requested the help from friends and students to uncrate the many boxes.

For judging the Annuals, Woodruff selected a juried panel for judging the Annuals, which included President Clement. Woodruff states: “I wanted him to know what he had gotten himself into.”²² Other artists included Jean Charlot, internationally famous painter of France and Mexico and artist in residence at the University of Georgia, Athens; Aaron Douglas, already well known artist and professor at Fisk University; Lewis P. Skidmore, Director of the High Museum of Art in Atlanta, and of course Woodruff.²³ Woodruff was adamant that quality was the exhibit’s goal:

I had always been aware of the absence of work by Negro artists. The absence of work by Negro artist’s led me to the idea of an all Negro-annual for the purpose

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

of (1) offering him a place to show, (2) giving him a little opportunity to earn a little money through purchase prizes, and (3) establishing a collection of art by Negroes at Atlanta University which would be available to students, schools, and other institutions throughout the country.²⁴

The first annual exhibition was formally opened on April 19, 1942, with an address by Aaron Douglas. After the lecture, a short discussion period followed. Then tea, talk, and viewing the exhibit took place. One hundred and seven paintings by sixty-two artists were on display at the exhibition. President Clement presented the awards for this exhibition on April 26, 1942. Woodruff invited Dr. Alain Locke to speak at the occasion. Locke praised Atlanta University in his remarks for taking the steps to initiate the exhibition. The content of his address, "The Significance of this Show in the Development of Negro Art and the Discovery of Negro Artists," is contained in the "Foreword" of the catalogue from the first Annual.²⁵

There is a peculiar timeliness and, as well, a special appropriateness to this first National Exhibit of the work of Negro Artists at Atlanta University. In the first place, one of the ultimate goals of the whole art movement among Negroes has been to encourage a healthy and representative art of the people with its roots in its own native soil rather than a sophisticated studio art divorced from the racial feeling and interest of the people. Pivotal to that, of course, is the difficult but vitally important task of bringing the Negro artist and his art back to the Southland. The ground has been well prepared. For ten years, Hale Woodruff and others have been developing at Atlanta University not an academic Department of Art, but a creative school of art expression. As a group they have already made a distinct and notable contribution to Contemporary art development in the South and among Negroes generally. In fact through years a sound groundwork had been laid that, with the proper guidance and encouragement, can easily become an important and flourishing art school, whose work will be of national as well as racial influence and significance.

²⁴ Winifred Stoelting, *Hale Woodruff: Artist and Teacher, Through the Georgia Years* (Ph.D. diss., Emory University, 1978), 16.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

The exhibition has a two-fold purpose, - to show the work of this Atlanta group in the perspective of the work of contemporary Negro artists from all over the country, and to reveal to the audience of the deep South the astonishing advance which has taken place generally among Negro artists in the last decade or so. Not merely from the traditional centers of Boston, New York, and Philadelphia does this work come, but in ever-increasing streams of creative talent from such relatively new centers as Chicago, Cleveland, Washington, Wilmington, Richmond, Greensboro, and New Orleans. Partly as a result of the wide encouragements of the Federal Arts Projects, but also as a natural ripening of our national culture, this more representative and democratic national art is now in full movement. The exhibition should convince any open minded observer that instead of being a struggling rearguard, contemporary young Negro artists are now in its vanguard . . . this pioneer general exhibition has special importance, and it is to be hoped that it will become an annual institution here at this important center of Southern culture, and thereby a means for steady improvement both of art production and art appreciation throughout the South.²⁶

The first Annual had a stellar roster of artists. Among them were William Carter, Claude Clark, Samuel Countee, Vertis Hayes, Fred P. Hollingsworth, Frederick Jones, Joseph A. Kersey, Richard Lindsey, James Dallas Parks, Robert Pious, Charles L. Sallee, Franklin Shands, Teresa Staats, and Dox Thrash. According to Dr. Stoelting, "Many would eventually gain recognition in the national and international arenas."²⁷ Charles H. Alston submitted an oil, *Ruins*, and three watercolors, one his prize winning *Farm Boy*; Elizabeth Catlett, a watercolor *Freyer*; Ernest Crichlow, two water colors and an oil, *Hairdresser*; Alan Rohan Crite, an oil *Three Sisters*; Joseph Delaney, a watercolor and two oils, *125th Street, New York City* and *Pelham Rocks*; Rex Gorleigh, a watercolor, *Misery*; William H. Johnson, an oil, *Jesus and the Three Marys*; Lois Mailou Jones, an oil, *Place du Tertre a Montmartre*, and her prize-winning watercolor, *Old House near*

²⁶ Winifred Stoelting, "The Atlanta Years: A Biographical Sketch" In *Hale Woodruff; Fifty Years of His Art* (New York: Studio Museum in Harlem, 1979), 23.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

Frederick, Virginia; Norman Lewis, two oils, *Jumping Jive* and *White Plains*; James A. Porter, three oils, one a portrait, *Negro Boy*, and Charles White, an oil, *This, My Brother*.²⁸

Woodruff's students were also represented in the national competition. Many would later gain recognition in the national and international art arenas: Frederick Flemister for his prize oil, *The Mourners*; Wilmer Jennings, oil, *Rendezvous*; Claude Lamar Weaver, two oils, *Autumn Scene* and *Blues in the Night*; Leroy C. Weaver, two oils, *Across the Track* and *Harvest Time*; Albert Wells, two oils, *The Bottoms* and *Georgia Landscape*; Robert Willis, an oil *Gossip*; Margery Wheeler Brown, four watercolors of flowers; Eugene Grigsby, three watercolors, *Landscape*, *Episcopal Church*, and *Yellow House*, and Vernon Winslow, a watercolor, *Hunter Street Barber Shop*.²⁹

An important contributor to the success of the first Atlanta Annual was Dorothy Wright, Director of Publicity for Atlanta University, Morehouse College, and Spelman College. She prepared all the printed materials including the announcements sent to the artists, the special invitations for the opening, the news releases and special news articles, and the mailing lists. Lists were also kept of known African-American artists and art publications.³⁰

People became interested in the arts at Atlanta University. On campus there had been considerable activity in the arts in the thirties but Woodruff now created new

²⁸ Winifred Stoelting, *Hale Woodruff: Artist and Teacher, Through the Georgia Years* (Ph.D. diss., Emory University, 1978), 23.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

excitement. Dr. Melvin Kennedy, retired Morehouse professor, believed that Woodruff, with the opening of the first Annual, sparked a true Renaissance in art in Atlanta. By 1945, the Atlanta Annuals had gained national attention. *Time* magazine wrote the following:

The new collection . . . proved that there is a worthwhile Negro art. The canvasses were strongly flavored with expressionism and romanticism, but most had a quality peculiarly their own . . . Favorite subject matter: Negroes. Favorite theme: Racial consciousness and antagonism.³¹

Time critics spoke of the Annuals gradual climb to national recognition:

The Atlanta Annual at first (1942) received a luke warm reception from Atlanta's white citizens. Local newspapers paid little or no attention. But a few of the city's strong-minded art lovers gave it a good hand. Atlanta Constitution newspaper editor, Ralph McGill offhandedly plugged the show after several prominent whites had spoken at its opening ceremonies, the all Negro annual gradually became an Atlanta institution. It became one of the South's outstanding art events, handing out \$1400 in prizes, tries to keep its show down to a carefully chosen group, this year rejected some fifty exhibitors.³²

Prices for the paintings were one-third to one-half the price of comparable paintings in Manhattan galleries. The works were purchased by African-American viewers. Among some of the visitors to this exhibit were Alonzo J. Aden of the Barnett Aden Gallery, Washington, DC; Langston Hughes of New York and Miss Mary Ellen Chase of Northampton, Massachusetts.³³ An indication that the Atlanta Exhibition of 1945 was well received by artists throughout the country is the fact that practically every one of the artists represented in the catalog, *The Negro Artist Comes of Age* (a national survey of contemporary American artists published that same year by the Albany Institute

³¹ Winifred Stoelting, "The Atlanta Years: A Biographical Sketch" In *Hale Woodruff; Fifty Years of His Art* (New York: Studio Museum in Harlem, 1979), 24.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

of Art), is a prize winner in the Atlanta collection or has had his or her work accepted for showing in the University gallery.³⁴

In a lecture at the opening of the commemorative exhibition, *Highlights from the Atlanta University Art Collection of Afro-American Art*, at the Atlanta High Museum of Art in 1973, Margaret Goss Burroughs, winner of the third print award at the 1945 Annual, told what it meant as a young black artist to be able to exhibit in the Atlanta University Annual:

But for the Atlanta Show, I might not be here. I never would have seen the creative light of day. For most of us, the Atlanta Show provided the first memory, the first mention and the first knowledge of black arts presence. In those catalogs from Atlanta we first read the names of people like Hale Woodruff, Jacob Lawrence, John Wilson, Elizabeth Catlett, Charles White, Aaron Douglas, William Artis, and many, many others. Many were unknown, but through this cultural vehicle, founded by Hale and nurtured by this great University, through this Annual, Atlanta University became an oasis in the Southern desert, not only for the black artist of the South, but for those in the East and West as well. To many of us coming up in the 40s, acceptance in the Atlanta show was the criteria which indicated that we had arrived as artists together from all over the country.³⁵

Although Woodruff was teaching at New York University in 1946, he came to Atlanta to set-up the show. He also served on the jury with Mr. Robert Rogers of the Atlanta Art Institute and Mr. Julian Harris, an Atlanta artist. The guest speaker for this event was Mr. Roland McKinney, the director of the Pepsi-Cola art competition. Six New York artists were winners. Charles White captured two awards for his paintings in tempera, *Two Alone*, and best portrait for his figure *Still Life*. He received the \$300 Edward P. Alford Purchase Prize, along with Charles Stallings of Baltimore who also

³⁴ Ibid. , 26.

³⁵ Ibid.

received the same prize for his sculpture *Saxophone Player*. The subject, style, and media of the ninety-seven works of art emphasized the diverse skills of the African-American artist.

In *Art Digest*, the critic Peyton Boswell commented on the 1946 exhibition by stating that the annual was not a case of racial segregation, but rather a valuable means of giving encouragement to a minority group that has a rich backlog of creative attainments. However Woodruff himself believed that the show should be an integrated experience.

Woodruff summarized:

During those years throughout the country, Negro educators and scholars were struggling to achieve what we call integration. I said to President Clement that we cannot strive for integration on the one hand and not integrate on the other, but he did not agree. He said that the University was not ready for that yet.³⁶

Dr. Brazeal, a faculty member at Atlanta University asserts:

Our reaction to the subject of integrating the show was to keep the show as it was, yet have universal participation by all people. Our thinking was that the whites have many places to exhibit elsewhere in the nation; . . . here it was a question of discovering Negro talent which would not take place had there been an integrated exhibit. In other words, the matter of discovery was our concern. For this reason, the black artist did not want to integrate.³⁷

Initiated and developed by Hale Woodruff, nurtured and supported by Atlanta University, the *Annual Exhibitions of Works by Negro Artists*, until its termination in 1970, played a major role in stimulating and displaying African-American art. Overall the Annuals brought to the Atlanta Collection 350 paintings, sculptures, and graphic works, jury selected from an estimated 5,000 pieces. The stature achieved by many of

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

the artists of these works indicate that the Atlanta Annuals were successful and played an important role in the artists' quest for recognition in the fine arts.

At present (2003), these works are housed in the Trevor-Arnett Library on the Clark Atlanta University campus. In 1973, at the opening of the commemorative exhibit of these works titled *Highlights from the Atlanta University Collection of Afro-American Art*, Dr. Richard Long, past chair of the Department of African-American Studies at Atlanta University and Professor Emeritus, reemphasized the significance of the collection:

The assembling of this group of works from the collection to be presented first in Atlanta and then throughout the country is an appropriate occasion for taking stock of the University's present and future role in the encouragement of the arts. The many requests made by students and the general public to view works held by the University have dramatized the need for a permanent and adequate exhibition and study facility at the University. The Atlanta University Afro-American Collection is a community and a natural patrimony, and it is hoped that the community and the nation will join in assuring that these important works have a setting worthy of their importance.³⁸

³⁸ Winifred Stoelting, *Hale Woodruff: Artist and Teacher, Through the Georgia Years* (Ph.D. diss., Emory University, 1978), 22.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE EARLY MURALS (1934-40)

Art has been for the few, but it should be for the many.¹

Hale Woodruff

The mural cannot be made a matter of private gain, it cannot be hidden away for the benefit of a certain privileged few. It is for the people. It is for all.²

José Clemente Orozco

During his career, Woodruff undertook eight mural projects. These eight projects can be categorized thematically into four major groups: (1) *Social Commentary* – intended to convey lessons in moral and social values through symbolic iconography and guiding text, (2) *History* - interpreting or recalling passages of the African-American saga, (3) *Biblical* - interpreting the narratives of the Christian faith, and (4) *Art and Culture* - documenting social and cultural phenomena. Woodruff utilized his mural projects to document the life accomplishments and historical achievements of Africans and African Americans.

The mural projects discussed in this chapter thematically fit into two of the four categories: Social Commentary and Historical. The murals in this grouping span a seven-year period, beginning in 1934 and ending in 1940, and constitute the mural

¹ Winifred Stoelting, *Hale Woodruff: Artist and Teacher, Through the Georgia Years* (Ph.D. diss., Emory University, 1978), 16.

² Stacy Ingram Morgan, *Social Realism in African American Literature and Visual Art, 1930–1952* (Ph.D. diss., Emory University, 1999), 55.

works of his Early Years (1934-1940). Those murals categorized as Social Commentary include *Negro in Modern American Life* and *Shantytown and Mudhill Row* (1934). Murals included in the Historical category are *Amistad* and *Founding of Talladega College 1839* (1939).

Chapter five incorporates all four categories of murals and thematically illuminates one mural from each. Conversely to his Early Years, Woodruff's mural projects completed between 1941-52 are referred to as the Latter Years and span an eleven-year period. These murals are discussed in chapter five.

THE EARLY YEARS (1934-1940)

For years, as African Americans fought to reveal their story to an uninterested audience, they also attempted to establish a place for their art by using themselves as the subject through which to express their own humanity. Romare Bearden asserted, "Whether it is race, gender, the social struggle, or whatever else needs expression, it is to that which the artist must surrender himself. An intense, eager devotion to present-day life, to study it, to help relieve it, is the calling of the Negro artist."³

The African-American artist assumed his work could play a special role in helping to point the way out of the socioeconomic hardships and injustices of the 1930s. Thus, muralists such as George Biddle observed a new sense of purpose among artist as the Depression ironically exerted "a more invigorating effect on American art than any past

³ Romare Bearden, *A History of African-American Artists: From 1792 to the Present* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1995), 141.

event in the country's history."⁴ George Biddle and other muralists have a long history in American art, extending back to the projects such as John Trumbull's proposal for the Capital in Washington.⁵ In 1934, Franklin D. Roosevelt launched the Works Progress Administration (WPA) and the public interest in murals rebounded. Although African Americans had to struggle for full participation in this government-sponsored program, it nonetheless proved to be a much – needed outlet for African-American artists of the 1930s and 40s. As part of the WPA's overarching agenda of serving a broad American audience with cultural representation from every ethnic group, the WPA encouraged artists to explore mural painting, in part, because the scale of this medium could capture the attention of a mass audience much more readily than could easel painting.

Murals were a dominant visual form through the second quarter of the century. Leading figures associated with mural activity and regionalism, include Grant Wood, John Stuart Curry, and Thomas Hart Benton. The government sponsored program under whose sponsorship artists produced these murals – Federal Arts Project (FAP) – used this as a springboard to bring the best in American art to the outlying communities far from major metropolitan art centers. Spurred on by the aims of the government projects and by a range of leftist and humanist political ideologies, most social realists sited their murals within particular public and semi-public institutional settings – e.g., libraries, hospitals, post offices, university campuses – in order to reach

⁴ Morgan, 50.

⁵ William E. Taylor and Harriet G. Warkel, *A Shared Heritage: Art by Four African American* (Indiana University Press, 1996), 124.

the type of mass audience not likely to venture into the gallery and museum exhibition venues of the conventional art world. Like most social realist painters, African-American artists also wanted to offer their community a narrative that would inspire and challenge, while also teaching history not yet acknowledged in the larger society. In this context, Edmund Barry Gaither asserts in his article *The Mural*

Tradition:

African –American artists such as Aaron Douglas, William Edouard Scott, Charles White, Hale Woodruff, and John Biggers valued the visual and didactic power of the mural. Their dedication to the task of restoring black peoplehood through heroic history paintings simply grew more vital after the Second World War. An examination of murals by Scott and Woodruff offers an opportunity to explore African-American mural art during the first half of the twentieth century and to demonstrate the change from narrative to abstract content.⁶

The Negro in Modern American Life

In 1934, the establishment of the Graphic Arts Division of the Works Progress Administration's Federal Art Project was to help support a great many artists. Woodruff commented: "I don't know if you call it 'moonlighting' or not, but during my spare time I did my project which paid \$23.75 a week. That was the general pay. It really kept everybody alive, it certainly kept the artist alive."⁷ That year the division provided Woodruff and a student, Wilmer Jennings, funding to produce two sets of murals – the first titled *The Negro in Modern American Life: Agriculture and Rural Life, Literature, Music, and Art* (fig. 4-1 through 4-4, p. 64-67), and *Mudhill Row and Shantytown*

⁶ Edmund Gaither, *A Shared Heritage: Art by Four African Americans* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996), 125.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 60.



Fig 4 -1. *Negro in Modern American Life: Agriculture and Rural Life*. D. T. Howard Junior High. Atlanta, GA.
Source: Winifred Stoelting diss. *Hale Woodruff: Through the Georgia Years*.



Fig. 4 -2. **Negro In Modern American Life: Literature.** David T. Howard Junior High, Atlanta, GA.
Source: Winifred Stoelting diss. *Hale Woodruff: Through the Georgia Years*



Fig. 4 -3. Negro in Modern American Life: Music. David T. Howard Junior High. Atlanta, GA.
Source: Winifred Stoelting diss. Hale Woodruff: Through the Georgia Years.



Fig. 4 - 4. *Negro in Modern American Life: Art*. David T. Howard Junior High Atlanta, GA
Source: Winifred Stoelting diss. *Hale Woodruff: Through the Georgia Years*

the second of which was a two panel mural. *Negro in Modern American Life* the four-panel mural, which Woodruff later admitted to disliking, was produced for the hallways of David T. Howard Junior High School in Atlanta. Woodruff understood the significance of placing murals in places that would be frequented by curious and young, impressionable minds.

Since the inception of this project, this researcher interviewed several students who attended Howard High (formerly David T. Howard Junior High) in the late 1940s and 1950s regarding their opinion about the mural. Unfortunately, none of the participants questioned remember the mural. Since the renovation of the facility, the murals have been removed and the whereabouts are unknown. Woodruff intentionally painted all of his murals on canvas for the purpose of removal, should the host wall need repairing or demolishing. It has not yet been determined when the mural was moved or where it is currently located. The limitations encountered while analyzing the mural *Negro in Modern American Life* was twofold: (1) the mural is unavailable for viewing and its whereabouts are unknown, and (2) the available images of this mural are second to third generation black and white photocopies. This limitation imposed upon the researcher created a difficult task in completely analyzing this mural project.

The first panel, (refer to Fig 4-1, p. 64) *Agriculture and Rural Life*, presents the viewer with an overall portrait of what daily life was like for most Negroes in the rural south. The setting for this mural is a rural business district, probably a small town where residents have come to shop and sell their harvested crops. In the center of the canvas, a young man is hauling vegetables or produce in bushel sized baskets. Behind

him a woman wears an oversized hat atop her head wrap to protect her from the sun. She looks toward an older couple (occupying the right center canvas) that is engaged in conversation with one another. Livestock is noticeably running amuck in the streets. The older woman firmly holds a basket containing her purchases around her forearm. In the background, a horse drawn cart and several buildings are evident whose constructs are reminiscent of a rural church or schoolhouse. Other figures less prominent in the panel perform routine daily tasks associated with rural life such as loading and unloading goods.

Panel two, (refer to fig. 4-2, p.65) *Literature* captures a writer at his desk who appears to be in deep thought contemplating the words that he will eventually place permanently on paper. As he proofs his manuscript, a young woman reads intensely a book of literature. The two prominent figures in this panel are placed in a recessed type arch which gives the appearance of the viewer looking through a window. To the left of the figures is a roll of parchment or papyrus paper used for writing documents. The scroll could symbolize the tradition of recording and writing of documents.

Panel three, (refer to fig. 4-3, p. 66) *Music* documents the Negro's contribution to the field of music in all genres, including Negro spirituals, jazz, blues, gospel and classical. In this panel, Woodruff utilizes the figures and places them in the context of a musical jam session. To the left, a man seated with his back to the viewer plays sheet music on the grand piano, while the woman sings along from her sheet music. In the right corner behind the woman, is a table filled with racks of long play (lp) records. Some have been removed from their jacket covers suggesting that the musicians are

learning to play contemporary and or popular recorded music of the day. In the right foreground, another musician tunes his violin. Although he is in the same room with the other figures, his activities appear isolated from the others.

Panel four, (refer to fig. 4-4, p. 67) *Art* depicts through a recessed arch, a sculptor at work along with his model perched atop a stool. In the foreground, lay pieces of the human body, which at some point will be assembled by the creator of these visual images. In the right portion of the canvas, a statue bearing no arms or legs is placed in the forefront of Roman columns, which suggests the European influence on Western artists.

Negro in Modern American Life appropriately places Negroes in several contexts on the American landscape. Woodruff successfully shares with the viewer the multi-faceted role that African Americans played in the rural countryside and the city as well as their significant contributions to all forms of art, including visual, performing, and literary. In doing so, Woodruff teaches that the Negro, although denied full access, continues to strive for the development of a richer American civilization to which he will contribute his full share.

Mudhill Row and Shantytown

Woodruff's second mural project was conceived and painted for The Atlanta School of Social Work. For many years prior to the affiliation, Atlanta University and Morehouse College each had offered courses of study and teaching positions in the social sciences. The University emphasized research while Morehouse directed its attention to social counseling. By 1929, however, a group of social workers and

socially-minded laymen agreed that a school for the teaching of social work to African Americans was needed in the south, and Atlanta was selected as the place. Morehouse assumed responsibility for housing the school and furnishing teaching personnel until the school became a separate, self-supporting professional school under the name of the Atlanta School of Social Work. It was incorporated under the laws of Georgia in 1925.⁸ After becoming an independent institution, the school occupied a one-classroom space in the Herndon Building at the corner of Auburn Avenue and Butler Street. Since it was more or less dependent upon individual contributions for support, it had no accreditation and struggled to survive. In 1927, the school had only ten students and three full-time faculty members. However, after moving to the Atlanta University campus in 1933, the school began to grow and later received recognition from the American Association of Social Work.⁹

In the following year, 1934, Woodruff and his student Wilmer Jennings were funded by the Division (WPA) to produce a set of murals for this site as well. Woodruff had already completed the *Negro in Modern America* earlier in 1934. The two-panel mural called *Shantytown and Mudhill Row* offered the viewer a stark portrayal of the economic and living conditions under which many southern Negroes endured. Ralph McGill, past editor of the *Atlanta Constitution*, wrote this commentary:

Both of them hurt with their garish poverty and their stark bleakness. Yet he has not exaggerated a single line nor forced a point. There they are. They speak for themselves. Both of them, especially *Mudhill Row*, are splendid illustrations

⁸ Florence Read, 1935-36; *Atlanta University School of Social Work Bulletin and Announcements*.

⁹ Clarence A. Bacote, *The Story of Atlanta University* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 328.

of the modern school. The climbing hill of raw, red clay, eroded and twisted is a vista of ugliness and harshness. It speaks with a thousand silent tongues.¹⁰

As noted earlier, The School of Social Work had been created to assist with reforming the south by training Negroes for service within the community. Woodruff's mural records the non-political aspect of life in the South while illuminating the deplorable living conditions that once surrounded the Atlanta University campus. These murals served as a testament and reminder to students engaged in the discipline of social work that reform was needed if the culture and plight of the African American were to improve. The resulting mural was a visual representation of the effect racism had on the Atlanta community. Woodruff's murals captured vividly the time period in which he lived. This period was overtly dotted with racism and segregation. Consequently, the economic conditions of African Americans were often stifling and psychologically debilitating.

Initially, it was unclear as to whether this was one mural or two, since the mural title utilizes the names from both panels. The researcher treats the two panels as one, due to the same thematic content and nature of the subject documented. Both panels of this mural were installed in the Atlanta University School of Social Work Building that stood on the quadrangle located due west of Trevor-Arnett Hall. The scene depicted in the mural titled *Mudhill Row* was characteristic of the landscape in and around Atlanta and the Atlanta University Center in the 1930s. After being commissioned to paint the mural at the bequest of the WPA, Woodruff was even more devoted to documenting life

¹⁰ Ralph McGill, *Quiet, Modest Negro Artist Here Hailed as One of the Modern Masters, Atlanta Constitution*, 18 December 1935.

of the African American through his own eyes as a means of self-expressionism.

Mudhill Row and Shantytown reflects the stark and bleak living circumstance of African Americans in the south. Most of the houses surrounding the Atlanta University campus during the 1920s and 30s were shotgun and small two room houses in very dilapidated conditions.

Although *Mudhill Row and Shantytown* received glowing comments from Ralph McGill, editor of *The Atlanta Constitution*, one can only speculate why Woodruff's other work *Negro in Modern American Life* completed the same year that depicted positive images of African-Americans and their important contributions in music, art, literature and agricultural life was omitted from McGill's editorial commentary. Maybe he never visited the site of Woodruff's first mural, *Negro in Modern American Life*. Unfortunately, a fire destroyed not only the School of Social Work Building but, the murals *Mudhill Row and Shantytown* which were housed inside as well.

The Amistad Mutiny of 1839

In addition to his teaching responsibilities at Atlanta University in 1936, Woodruff gave lectures every Friday evening at Talladega College in Talladega, Alabama. One evening after class, Dr. Buell Gallagher, President of Talladega College, approached Woodruff with the idea of doing two murals for the new library. The first mural would represent the founding of Talladega College in 1867 and the second would symbolize the Amistad Mutiny of 1839. Out of the Amistad mutiny, people like Josiah Willard, The Baldwins, Tappan and others formed the American Missionary Association. It was through the efforts of this organization (AMA) that many of the

black schools in the South were founded, of which Talladega was one. The mutiny took place in 1839 and the mural was painted exactly one hundred years later, in 1939.¹¹

Prior to Gallagher approaching him with the idea, Woodruff admitted that he had never heard of the Amistad mutiny. Being unfamiliar with the subject matter, his research led him to travel north from Atlanta to New Haven, Connecticut to Yale University. There he visited the Yale University Library and the New Haven Historical Society's Archives that housed letters and actual accounts of the Amistad case, including drawings and engravings of most of the prominent men involved.¹² After completing the research, Woodruff began to translate his written material into visual images. His sketches were incorporated into small-scaled painted studies, which were later transferred onto larger sheets of paper that had already been marked into squares. Once the images were transferred onto paper, the paper was pricked, and placed over the canvas, allowing the charcoal to filter down onto the canvas, leaving the outline of the composition. According to Woodruff, the canvas his students had primed with homemade gesso was now ready for painting. Three months of intensive research and nine months of painting produced three panels. When placed side-by-side they measure six and a half feet by forty-two feet.

Woodruff's first critically important mural, *The Amistad Mutiny*, was dedicated in 1939. This mural honored the American Missionary Association (AMA), which had grown out of the Amistad revolt. In time, the AMA played a significant role in the

¹¹ Gylbert Coker, "Art as History and Epic: The Murals." In *Hale Woodruff: Fifty Years of His Art* (New York: Studio Museum in Harlem, 1979), 60.

¹² *Ibid.*

establishment of many black colleges and normal schools, including Atlanta University, Fisk University, Tougaloo College, and Straight (Dillard) University.¹³ In an effort to convey the story accurately, Woodruff uses three dramatic moments: panel one shows the mutiny in progress, panel two presents the trial, and panel three depicts the return of the Mendes captives to West Africa. Each panel is organized around a single dramatic event, although related sub-themes are generally present.

The first panel, (refer to Fig. 4-5, p. 74) *The Mutiny Aboard the Amistad*, 1839, has Cinque, leader of the revolt, in the foreground struggling with the ship's cook, while Gaby, his lieutenant, overpowers Ruiz, one of the slave owners. The figures are designed in an overlay fashion so that they are seen as one complete unit moving from the left ushering the escaping sailor who reappears in the second panel as the accuser. Four groups of combatants dominate the shallow space of the ship's deck. Space shortage is further emphasized by the foreclosing effect of the lower tip of the sail and the base of the mast. In the distance, an angry and agitated sea swells. In the group of combatants, the smooth, muscular, dark skin of the Africans, clad only in loincloths, contrasts sharply with the generally light garments of the Europeans. Amid the rhetorical gestures of the fighting men, the machetes stand as emblems of revolutionary victory.

Cinque shares the spotlight with the other captives. The whites can, therefore, be viewed as a collective force of oppression. The fierce look on the African's faces

¹³ Gaither, 132.

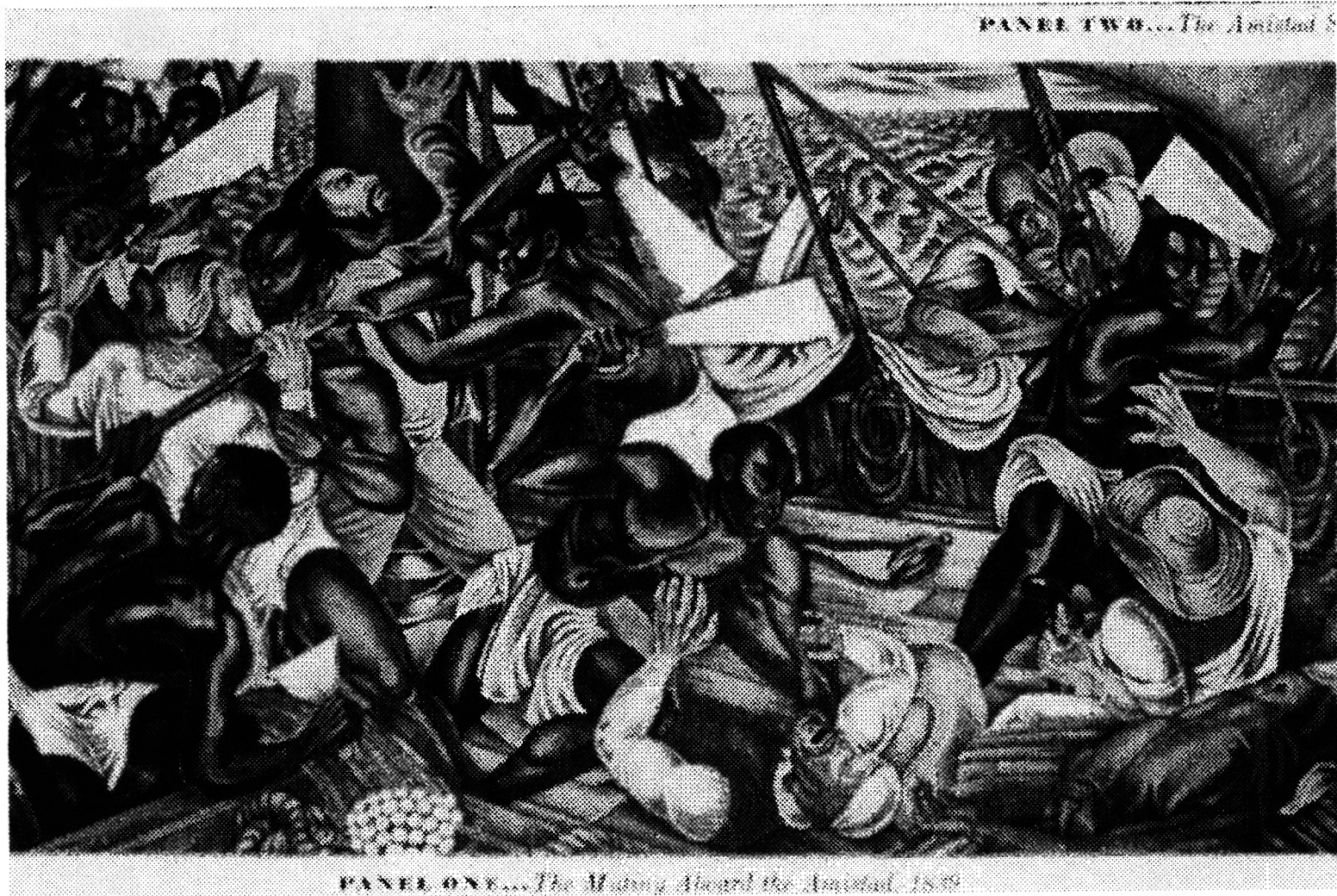


Fig. 4-5. Amistad: *The Mutiny*, Panel I. Talladega College, Alabama. Source: Photo collection of author.

To the left, Africans ponder escaping overboard into the sea. Near the mast, a slave, who had come onboard with the Cubans and is dressed like a Spaniard, climbs the ropes. The revolt continues in the far right corner.

The second panel, (refer to Fig. 4-6, p.76) *The Amistad Slaves on Trial at New Haven Connecticut*, 1840, offers a calm, orderly arrangement of figures divided into three basic units. The refugees sit with their abolitionist friends before the courts and their accusers: Ruiz, Montez, and representatives of the ship owners and their counsels. The intense expression of the African faces informs viewers that the lives of these men are at stake. The three most important figures, Cinque, the judge, and the accusing sailor are centralized and placed at a slightly higher level than the other participants at the trial. This panel is also set in a shallow space in the New Haven courtroom and the judge's bench serves as the dividing bar between the defense and the prosecution.

On the defense side, Cinque stands in adamant defiance of the charges that have been alleged against him and the other enslaved Africans. Cinque's stance suggests his confidence and assurance of complete exoneration of all charges. On the prosecution side are Montez, the ship owners, and their lawyer and James Covey, the cabin boy turned interpreter. Behind them are Lewis Tappan, Josiah Gibbs of Yale University, and the Reverends Day, Whipple, and Bacon. Ruiz, standing and pointing at Cinque, whom he accuses of murder and piracy, dominates this side of the panel. Justice Smith Thompson, although near the center, merely serves as a backdrop to the charged encounter between accuser and accused.

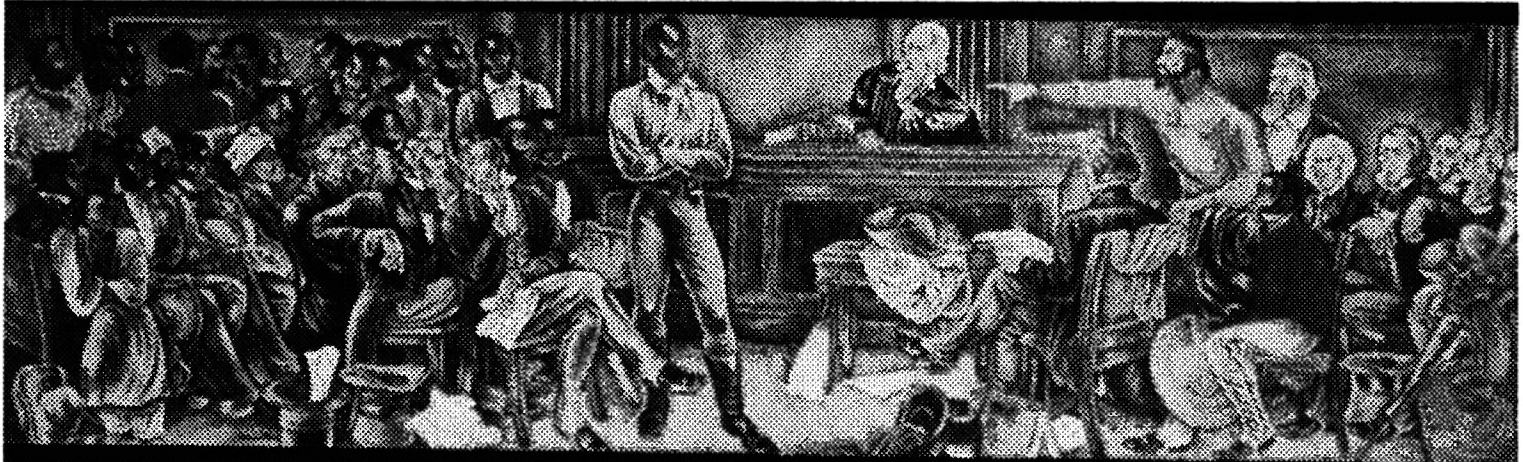


Fig 4-6. **Amistad: *The Trial***, Panel II. Talladega College, Alabama. *Source:* Photo collection of author.

show determination in defeating their captives. Their muscular bodies are symbolic of the African form of beauty, which Woodruff beautifully expresses on the canvas.

The final panel, (refer to Fig. 4-7, p.78) *The Return to Africa, 1842*, presents the viewer with a boatload of former slaves returning to their homeland in Africa. *The Return*, like *The Trial*, is sharply divided. On the edge of the Mende coast stands Cinque, now known as Joseph Cinquez, accompanied by missionaries, teachers and advisors. Nearby is a young girl and the returning parties' books and a charter for the school which will now be established for Africans.¹⁴ In the foreground are a chest and crate that have been opened to reveal necessary supplies for inaugurating a school. The foreground positioning of these items indicates their importance in the context of this particular event, their return to Mendeland. Woodruff has positioned the crate in the right lower register immediately below the feet of the central figure Cinquez. As a result of their safe return, Cinquez and his followers had the undaunting challenge of establishing schools on African soil with supplies provided by the American missionaries. The opened crate contains the charter with which Cinquez will establish the first school.

The middle of the canvas celebrates jubilant returnees making their way to land in a long boat from the ship that brought them safely from the Americas. The other eight figural men and women have a stoic look on their faces indicative of the long struggle and hardships endured while transcending the middle passage back to their homeland. In the foreground Cinque gestures as if to deliver a proclamation, while a

¹⁴ Taylor and Warkel, 134.

27 *New Haven, Connecticut, 1840*



PANEL THREE... *The Return to Africa, 1843*

Fig. 4 -7. *Amistad: Return to Mendes, Africa*, Panel III. Talladega College, Alabama. Source: Photo Collection of author.

man to the right displays books and other material acquired during their involuntary stay in America.

The canvas is further balanced by Woodruff's use of two background male figures, one placed on each side of the canvas. Much of the action is in the turn of the heads of these two male figures who acknowledge the arrival of the passengers from the long boat. The long boat occupants cause the viewer's eyes to sweep upwards to the center of the canvas where the ship is anchored off shore.

W.E.B. Du Bois comments on the Talladega murals:

Woodruff of Atlanta dropped his wet brushes, packed his rainbow in his knapsack and rode post-haste into Jim Crow Alabama. There he dreamed upon the walls of the Savery Library the thing of color and beauty . . . to keep the memory of Cinque, of the Friendship (Le Amistad) and the day when he and his men, with their staunch white friends, struck a blow for freedom for mankind.¹⁵

In an effort to promote the murals, Du Bois raised money and produced color prints of them, which were distributed as inserts accompanying a 1936 related article in Atlanta University's literary journal, *Phylon*.

The Founding of Talladega College

Woodruff produced another three-panel mural for the Library at Talladega College titled *The Founding of Talladega College*. The first panel, (refer to Fig. 4-8, p. 80) *Underground Railroad*, depicts episodes associated with the Underground Railroad and the abolitionists who helped launch education in the post civil war South. The scene depicts escaping slaves awaiting a riverboat that would ferry them north towards freedom. Sympathetic whites who assisted such departures later formed the

¹⁵ Ibid. , 135.



Fig. 4-8. **Founding of Talladega College: *Underground Railroad***. Panel I. Talladega College, Alabama.
Source: Photo collection of author.

American Missionary Association (AMA) and proved great friends to southern education for African Americans. The center foreground depicts a weary passenger of the Underground Railroad resting on a white sheet after traveling extensively to escape his pursuers. The white sheet symbolically suggests the traveler has already surrendered himself to the care of the conductor of the Underground Railroad in hopes of being liberated from oppression. Directly behind him another passenger is being ushered from the arms of his abolitionists friend. Reluctantly, the refugee moves forward, as the white man prepares to accept a letter from the other abolitionist. This letter represents the “pass” these travelers will need to board the riverboat for transport to the other side.

At the top center of the panel a horse has raised back on its hindquarters as a result of the steamboat whistle which has signaled the moment of departure for a promised land. The stagecoach that is positioned just below the horses’ front legs, hurries to the dock, which is the point of departure for the steamboat. The driver of the coach lifts his hand with the whip hurled high in the air and curtains flapping wildly outside the stagecoach window indicating the speed necessary to reach the dock before the departure of the boat. The rider of the horse holds a newspaper high in the air warning the travelers that a bounty is on their heads and a great reward has been offered for their capture.

To the extreme left of the canvas are an old man and woman who precariously move from behind the tree in preparation to make their way down the hill to the river in order to avoid becoming captives in exchange for the reward. Both eagerly await a

signal from the agent of the underground railroad from the river's edge before proceeding further. Clutched in the woman's hands is a book that further acknowledges her resolute defiance to escape her psychological and physical oppression. It was against the law for enslaved persons to read. Woodruff uses darker colors to treat the mood of the subjects in the corner, and doing so causes the viewer to move back to the center of the panel. In the upper right corner of the panel, a white man uses a red handkerchief to signal someone on the steamboat that the other cargo is ready for boarding. The thick black smoke emoting from the riverboat smokestack is yet another indicator that the moment of departure to a promised land of freedom is near. Woodruff's use of earth tone colors causes the viewer's eyes to focus on the central figures in this panel. The viewer then shifts focus to the right, since this is the direction of all movement. The brighter primary colors used with the central figures causes the viewer's eyes to retreat back to the center of the panel.

Panel two, (refer to Fig. 4-9 II-A, p.83 and Fig. 4-10 II-B, p. 84) *Opening Day*, figures on the left side of the panel represent students preparing to enroll and the others eagerly awaiting their turn. They have arrived with the necessary items for their matriculation into college. The guitar, that will be used for entertainment and relaxing after class, is perched behind a large picnic basket whose contents swell beyond the rim but are unknown since a white cloth covers the basket. Woodruff lightens the serious tone of the mural with minor distractions, such as the escaping chicken and the peering old man beyond the picket fence. Well populated with students, teachers, and well wishers, (fig. 4-9, II-B) shows new students sitting before the school's registrar with



Fig. 4-9. **Founding of Talladega College: *Opening Day*** Panel II-A. Talladega College, Alabama. Source: Photo collection of author.

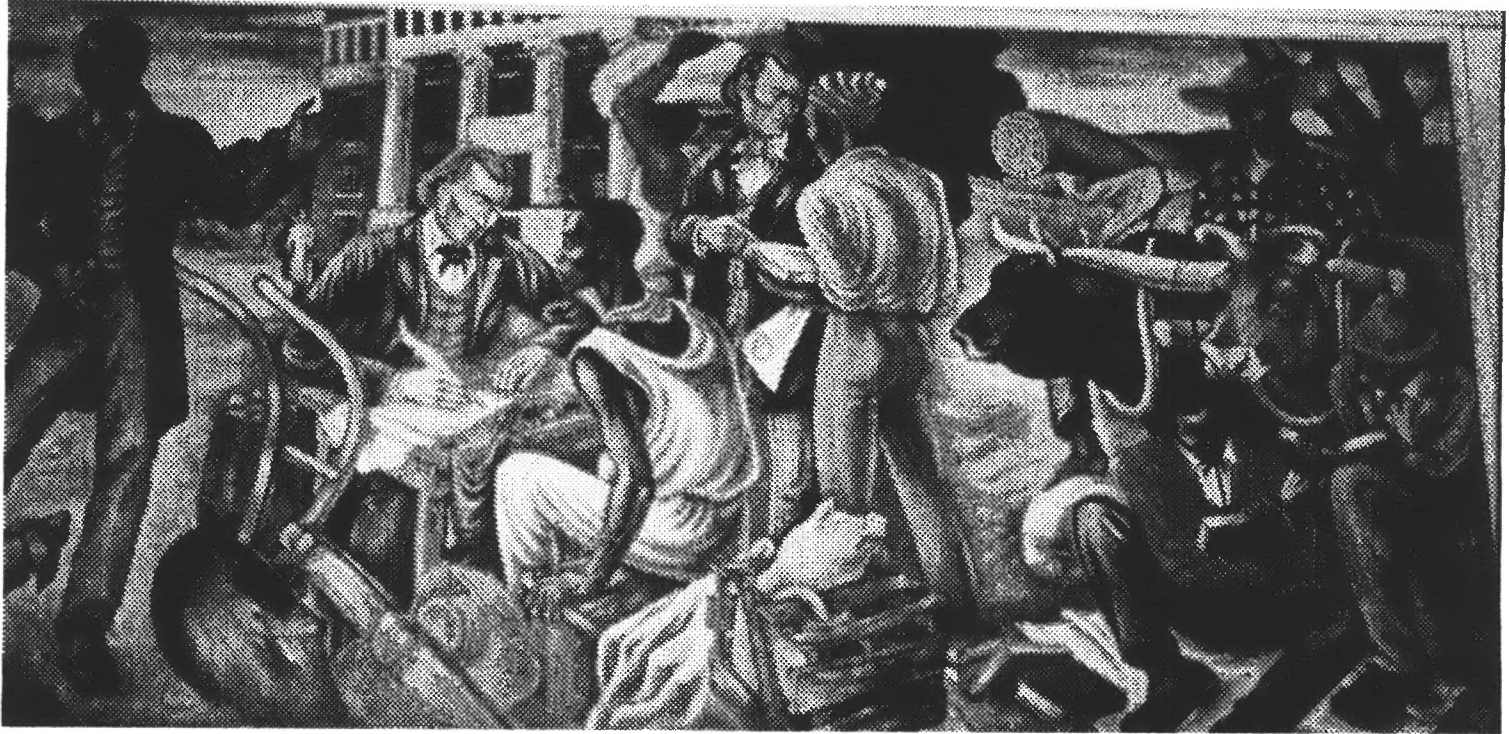


Fig. 4-10. **Founding of Talladega College: *Opening Day* Panel II-B.** Talladega College, Alabama. *Source:* Photo collection of author.

quill in hand, accepting fee payment from students in the form of farm produce and livestock. This arrangement practiced in the mid-twentieth century, allowed children of the rural poor to afford college even though they were still participating partly in subsistence or sharecropping economy. Prominent in the scene is William Savery, a former slave for whom the library is named, with white abolitionists and educators. Woodruff also moves the action from left to right in this panel.

Once again, Woodruff utilizes the lightness of the subjects' apparel while also occupying the entire center of the canvas from top to bottom, thereby drawing the viewers' focus to the middle of the panel. His compositional arrangement of the subjects allows the viewer to grasp the seriousness of registration day. The student sits before the registrar with relaxed shoulders as he leans forward anticipating the Registrar's final decision regarding his acceptance into Talladega College. The sullen expression on his face and the drooped shoulders reinforces the humble demeanor of the student as he listens intently to the registrar's instructions. Beside him lay a plow, oxen skirt, and a straw hat which suggests that he was a farmer or sharecropper. Immediately to his rear is a piglet attempting to escape from his crate. The piglet in an upward motion is halfway out of the crate, forcing the viewer's eyes upward along the muscular legs of the other student who is engaged in conversation regarding his textbook with another administrator of the college.

In the far right corner of the panel students have registered and are perusing their books, probably for familiarization with the text. Woodruff uses shadowing to convey the intensity of his subjects' faces and the fluidity and strength of body form. In the

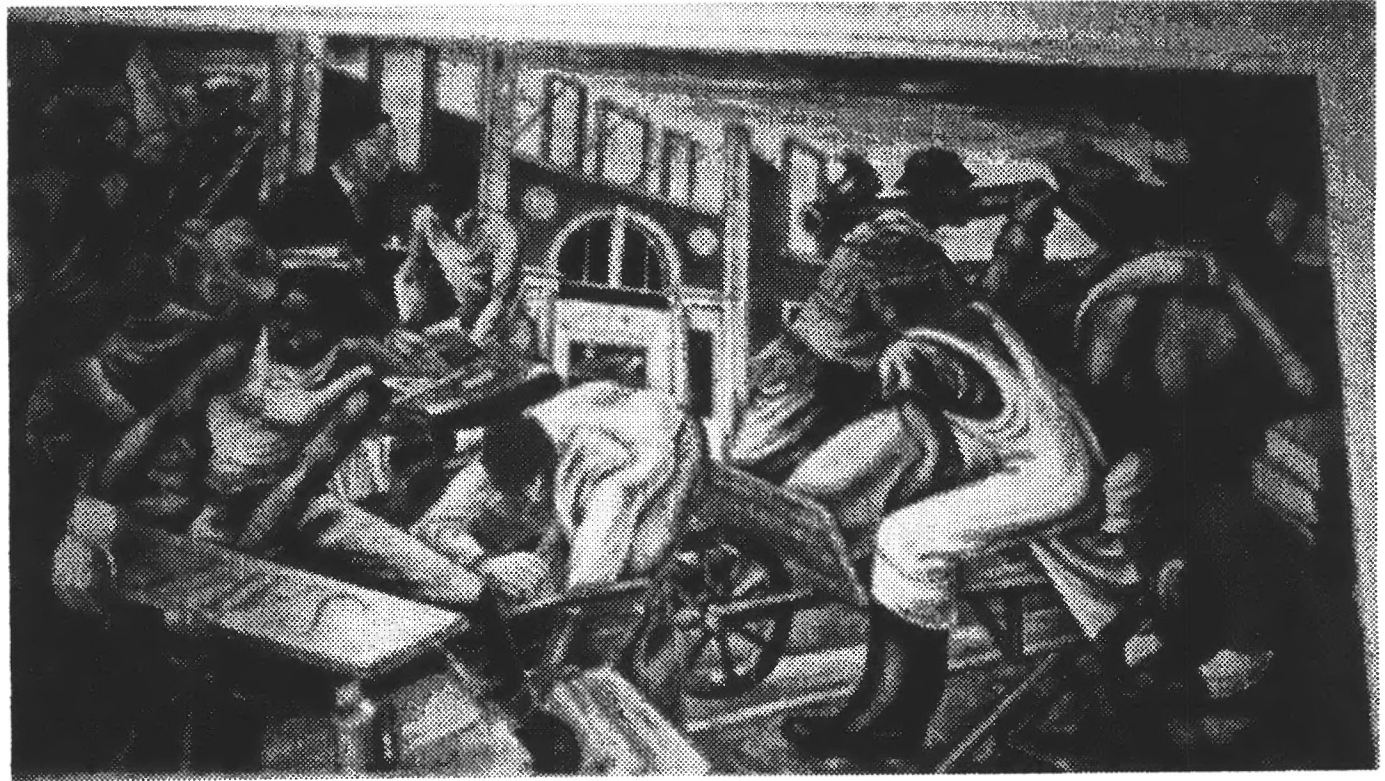


Fig. 4-11. **Founding of Talladega College: *Building Savery* Panel III.** Talladega College, Alabama. *Source:* Photo collection of author.

background, hurried workers are busy making ready for storage cut sugar cane along with sacks of wheat and grain.

The last panel, (refer to Fig. 4-11, p. 86) *Building Savery Library*, illustrates busy carpenters and masons with the architect. The circular motion of the action causes the eye to move around the school, symbolizing the importance of education in general, and this school, Talladega, in particular. Subjects in the left field of the canvas lean to the right, juxtaposing the figures to the right that lean left forcing the viewer back to the center of the canvas. All workers are engaged in physical activities, and Woodruff conveys their movement using form of body to illustrate labor intensity. In the foreground, a laborer bends to lift bricks for the frame of the unfinished library positioned in the background of the canvas. Woodruff's use of shadow on the rear of the laborer's legs intensifies the muscles and strength required to move the Savery Library sign. Woodruff exaggerates arm length as well as oversized gloves on the hands to accentuate the power required of the laborer to lift the sign.

A man in overalls loads the wheelbarrow, and his motions are used to balance the figure to the left lifting the Savery sign. In the right lower corner of the panel, a brick mason meticulously prepares the mortar for the formation of each brick. Immediately above him is a figure on a horse looking towards the worker on the top of the library laying bricks on the outer wall. Below him a man hurries with a pipe, as he has just received his instructions from the architect and his assistant.

Behind the architect, a man can be seen climbing up the ladder with supplies positioned on his shoulders. On a plot that had formerly been a prep school for white

young men, Talladega College was founded in 1867 as a college for African Americans. Transforming ex-slaves who had been denied basic education into literate, capable people was a difficult task that might have been fatally discouraging except for the great importance freedmen attached to learning. Thus, the mural honors the contributions of ex-slaves. The American Missionary Association (AMA) helped underwrite the purchase of the college's first building, Swang Hall. AMA also played a leading role in the construction of Savery Library, named for a former slave.¹⁶

Traditionally, African artisans accentuated body parts by exaggerating them to signify their beauty and strength. Woodruff utilizes this same concept in his paintings and asserts: "What I try to do is delve into and discover the aesthetic aspects of African art. I don't strive to be illustrative or even sentimental. For my own purpose getting at the essences of the object itself – not so much its historical or its religious meaning or its function in society – but how the artist himself works."¹⁷

Woodruff's desire to re-claim his African heritage through expression in his art work is evidenced in his murals. He consciously sought to divest himself from those art forms, which did not speak of his African lineage. Woodruff fulfills his desire by offering two social commentary murals that address the conditions under which African Americans lived and worked, while also illuminating their (African Americans) significant contributions to American Life. While many artists were often powerless to organize festivals pertaining to the carriers of their culture, Woodruff should be hailed

¹⁶ Gaither, 171.

¹⁷ Hale Woodruff, Interview by Albert Murray, August 1978, tape 1, John Hewitt Papers Schomburg Collection, New York.

as a champion for the safekeeping of the history of his people. The magic of these visual forms, which survived the ordeal of slavery in the United States, the Caribbean and South America speak clearly of an African sensibility in contemporary American art.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE LATTER MURALS (1941-52)

Artistic structure makes tangible the intangibility of the spirit of man, the artist – For the artist is, or should be, one of the Spirit. – And if that spirit of the artist is concerned with man – Then so much the greater the significance of his work. It is through the Arts – All arts – that the spirit of man is best realized – transmitted to others.¹

Hale Woodruff

Woodruff's mural projects completed between 1941-52 are referred to as the latter murals. During this period Woodruff created his most aesthetically resolved work, *Art of the Negro*. This chapter incorporates all four categories of murals (Social Commentary, Historical, Biblical, and Art and Culture) thematically illuminating one mural from each.

As mentioned in the introductory chapter, the mural project titled *Results of Poor Housing, Results of Good Housing* (1941) is categorized as Social Commentary. Panel two of the mural *History of California, (Settlement and Development, 1948-49)* located at the Golden State Life Insurance company, represents a Historical account of the African-American contribution to the growth and expansion of California. The *Wheat Street Murals* (1942) capture three events from the New Testament featuring the Christ and is

¹ Hale Woodruff, interview by Albert Murray, August 1978, tape 1, John Hewitt Papers Schomburg Collection, New York.

therefore categorized as Biblical. *Art of the Negro* (1952) considered a mural epic, links a series of significant cultural events, and is therefore categorized as Art and Culture.

Results of Poor Housing, Results of Good Housing

With the collapse of the banking system in 1929, the Federal government was compelled to find solutions to what quickly became a national housing crisis. The administration of Franklin D. Roosevelt began a number of initiatives directed at stabilizing America's housing stock. These initiatives encouraged home construction and promoted home ownership. One such initiative was the Housing Act of 1937, which created the United States Housing Authority whose duties included overseeing the construction of low-rent public housing erected by the local authorities.²

In 1942, Woodruff completed a Works Progress Administration (WPA) commission for a pair of murals that illustrated the importance environment plays in peoples lives. This mural pair, unlike any of the other murals projects Woodruff had completed, was painted on identical wood boards measuring four feet by eight feet.

Reflecting President Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal optimism, the two paintings contrasted a group of haggard people outside run-down shacks and outhouses with their much happier counterparts seen against a backdrop of sturdy, government-built multifamily dwellings. On the first panel, *Results of Poor Housing*, (refer to Fig. 5-1, p.91) the community of unhappy residents congregates outside the rickety shacks and outhouses. The trickling stream, an artery for unsanitary water and harbinger for disease, descends vertically through the picturescape from the direction of the outhouses. The

² Mark Kemp, Interview by Nacoleon Hillsman, Atlanta, GA, 3 May 2003.

only sign of constructive activity is seemingly at the contaminated streams end, where a girl and boy have gathered to rummage through the refuse. The young girl squats to pick carefully through the garbage as a black cat sniffs through the discarded material she has pushed aside. The others sit and wait, unable to shake the fixed melancholy state that is reflective of their living conditions.



Fig. 5-1. **Results of Poor Housing**, Atlanta Housing Authority. Atlanta, GA. Source: Photo by author.

Incised on the back of *Results of Poor Housing* is a list that includes disease, crime, vagrancy, lack of pride, poor citizenship, ignorance, and low morals. It is not

certain whether Woodruff wrote this inscription, but it is clear these are the conditions this panel represents.



Fig. 5-2. **Results of Good Housing.** Atlanta Housing Authority. Atlanta, GA. Source: Photo by author.

On the second panel *Results of Good Housing*, (refer to Fig. 5-2, p. 92) energetic children play happily at recess on a playground surrounded by well-kept buildings and a neatly manicured lawn. The dominant male figure, standing with hat, appears to be headed for work. He carries his lunch in his left hand. A watchful mother gives explicit instructions to her school age son before leaving for school. Another couple appear as custodians of the neatly manicured flower garden while one resident holds cut flowers from the garden in her hand along with a potted plant. Both will probably be used to beautify the interior of her home. In this panel, the housing units are constructed of solid

brick and in good condition. On the reverse of *Results of Good Housing* the inscription includes civic pride, good citizenship, education, health, and wise use of leisure. The painting was designed to emphasize the effects of living in new housing developments.

According to Atlanta Housing Authority (AHA) documents, Woodruff gave the presentation (preliminary sketches) drawings for these murals to James H. Therrell, the first Director of Atlanta's Housing Authority. The AHA managed the first subsidized housing in the United States.³ Mark Kemp, Risk Manager for Atlanta Housing Authority stated:

Upon their completion in 1942, the murals hung in the Herndon Homes Management Office until around 1994 when renovations of this facility began. During the renovation of Herndon Homes Management Office the murals were moved to AHA Offices at 739 West Peachtree Street. The murals hung in a narrow hallway about eight feet in width. An impromptu meeting in the hallway occurred with AHA and myself Director, Rene Glover. She inquired if the paintings were worth anything, which prompted me to have them appraised. After the appraisal was completed, the AHA incurred the expense of having the murals conserved. They were photographed and exact replicas were produced and hung in the AHA Board room. The originals were stored in my office until a suitable facility could be secured for their permanent display.⁴

The murals are currently on a two-year loan to the Atlanta High Museum and will be returned to the AHA in 2004. AHA is currently accepting proposals from galleries for consideration of a long-term exhibition loan for these murals.

The Wheat Street Murals

The *Wheat Street Murals*, painted in 1942, are named for their location at Wheat Street Baptist Church in Atlanta, Georgia. These murals, rarely known by most to be the

³ Catherine Fox, *Tale of Two Murals*, Atlanta Journal Constitution, 26 March 2003, sec. E, p. 1.

⁴ Mark Kemp, Interview by Nacoleon Hillsman, Atlanta, GA, 3 May 2003.

work of Woodruff, were painted at the request of the late pastor Dr. William Holmes Borders, Sr. In an effort to give proper credence to Woodruff's mural, it is critical to understand the role of Wheat Street Baptist Church (refer to fig. 5-3, p. 95) in the civil rights struggle against racism and segregation. It is within this church that one of Woodruff's most significant works is housed. To fully understand and contextualize the mural, it is important to understand the history and role of this particular church in the city of Atlanta during this period.

In 1870, a group of white missionaries from Friendship Baptist Church organized and relocated their worship services to Fort and Old Wheat Streets near Auburn Avenue for African American worshippers. However, this structure was completely destroyed by fire in 1917. A new building site was later selected at the corner of Yonge and Auburn Avenue. The construction of the new church began, but remained incomplete for seventeen years. In 1937, William Holmes Border, an African American, became the fifth pastor of Wheat Street Baptist Church. Under the pastoral guidance of Borders, the main sanctuary was finally completed in nineteen months. The church has a rich history and served as a focal point for the national and local civil rights movements. The Scripto strike of 1945 was headquartered in Wheat Street Baptist Church and the laundry workers also organized there in 1950. At that time, these workers made about seventeen cents an hour. In addition to the Scripto strike headquarters the Triple "L" Movement also found its home at Wheat Street Church. Buses were desegregated in Atlanta by the Triple "L" movement.⁵ As a result, the African-American operators of Atlanta buses came from this

⁵ Wheat Street Church Annual, *Centennial Anniversary Yearbook*, 1972.

effort. Reverend Borders headed the Triple “L” Movement.⁶ Borders was not only a visionary, but also an astute businessman and active in the civil rights struggle in the South.

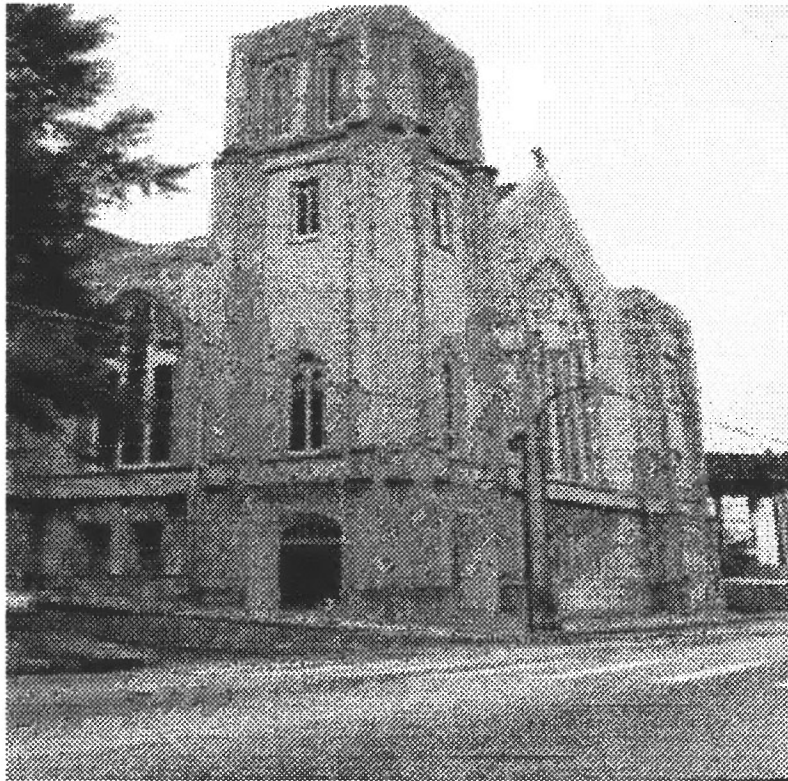


Fig. 5-3. Wheat Street Baptist Church, Atlanta, Georgia . *Source:* Photo by author.

Although progress was being made in terms of social integration in the South, Borders recognized that tensions still prevailed, creating a racial divide. Wheat Street played a vital role in local civil rights by supporting the organization of grass roots auxiliaries, which promoted integration in the schools and equal access to employment opportunities for African Americans.

Large contingencies of Wheat Street worshipers were members of Atlanta’s African-American social elite. Marian Anderson and Paul Robeson were known to

⁶ Ibid.

worship there when visiting Atlanta. Wheat Street Baptist Church, along with Grace United Methodist and Second Ponce De Leon, televised worship services during the 1940s and 50s from their sanctuaries on alternating Sundays at 11:00 am via WSB Channel 2, a local network station in Atlanta, Georgia.⁷ This was unusual for an African-American Church to broadcast images from their worship service to a majority southern white and racist population.

Maybe it was for this reason that Borders commissioned Woodruff to represent images of the Christ as European. Borders was known for his philosophical biblical teachings, his large, progressive church, which boasted several thousand members and his active front row involvement in the civil rights movement. Therefore, one could assume the figures Woodruff represents in his religious rendering would be of color. Based upon Woodruff's prior training and exposure to African Art and Culture, the figural representation in the Wheat Street panels may not necessarily be the express interpretation of Woodruff, but that of Borders. This would be particularly true since the actualization and representation of these images, based upon Border's philosophy, would not be acceptable in the South, much less, shown on a locally broadcast television network.

Nonetheless, in 1942, Hale Woodruff painted the *Wheat Street Mural*. This mural consists of three panels and depicts the *Baptism of John*, *The Crucifixion*, and *The Last Supper*. The dimensions for the two smaller panels (*Baptism and Last Supper*) are thirteen and a half feet in height at the apex and measure about nine feet in width. The largest of the three panels, *The Crucifixion*, measures almost sixteen feet in height and

⁷ Wheat Street Church, *Centennial Anniversary Yearbook*, 1972, 15.

nine feet in width. The researcher postulates that Woodruff was not excited about the execution of this mural project. Unlike *Amistad* and *Art of the Negro*, Woodruff rarely mentions the *Wheat Street* murals in any of his interviews or personal writings.

In the first panel (refer to Fig. 5-4, below), titled the *Baptism of John*, Woodruff evenly divides the canvas utilizing the foreground, middle, and background. The water ripples slightly due to the movement of the two central figures prominently situated in the middle one-third of the canvas. The dove, brightly illuminated, symbolizes The Holy Spirit and is overseeing the entire baptism. The figures in the pool lack the exaggeration and cohesion of fluidity as the other figures in Woodruff's previous work.

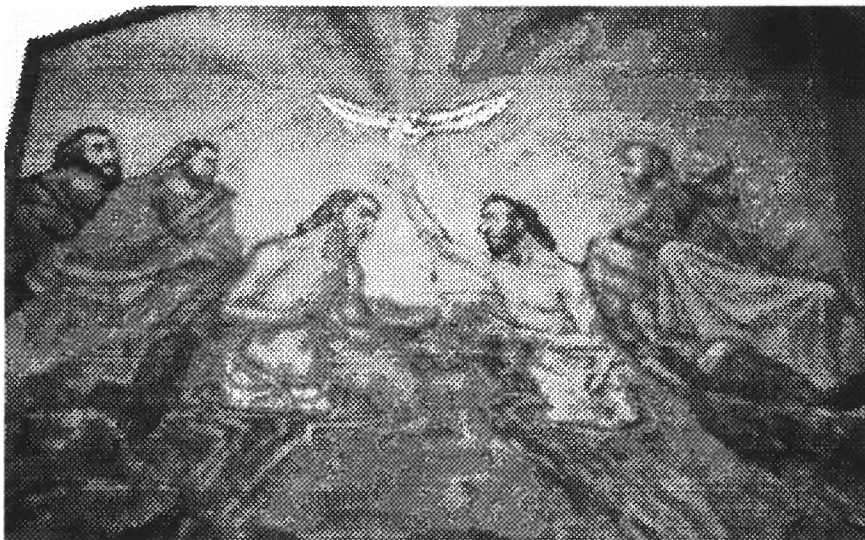


Fig. 5-4. Wheat Street Murals: *The Baptism of John*, Panel I. Wheat Street Baptist Church, Atlanta, Georgia. Source: Photo by author.

The Last Supper, (refer to Fig. 5-5, below) which is the second of three panels, depicts Jesus preparing to eat his final meal with his twelve disciples. A bread loaf is placed in the middle of the canvas, symbolic of the last meal Jesus and his disciples ate together in the upper room of the guesthouse. At first glance this depiction of the last supper is no different from most other religious renderings prevalent throughout churches

in America. However, upon closer examination, the central figure, Jesus, is illuminated by a triangle of light rays positioned directly above his head. This triangle could be a semaphore symbolic of the ancient pyramids. The halo, which appears directly above Jesus, is reminiscent of the third eye of Horus, an ancient Egyptian symbol of spiritual enlightenment. Unlike any of his other murals painted during this period, known as the *Emergence of Negro Protest* (1915-1951),⁸ Woodruff is able to capture

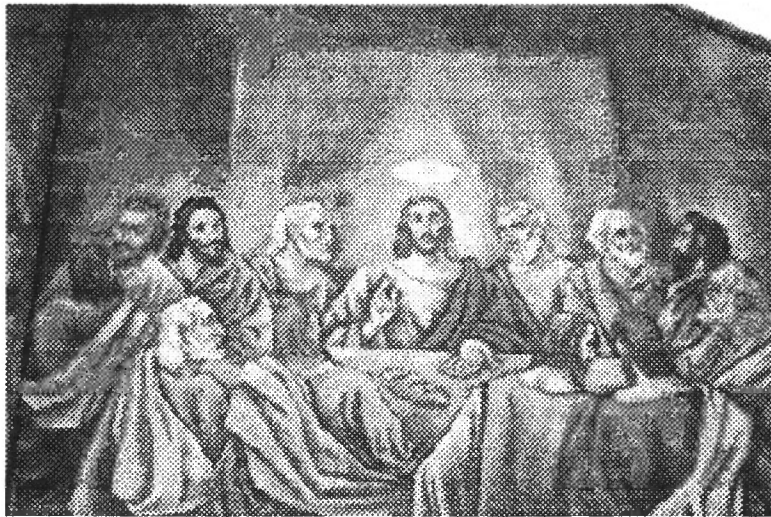


Fig. 5-5. Wheat Street Murals: *The Last Supper*, Panel II. Wheat Street Baptist Church Atlanta, GA. Source: Photo by author.

these images using a style reminiscent of the French painter and impressionist Cézanne. The lack of shadow on the central figure and the disciples gives the painting a flat two-dimensional feeling.

The third panel, (refer to Fig. 5-6, p. 103), *The Crucifixion*, represents the physical death of Jesus. The cross of Calvary, upon which Jesus was crucified, stands between the two crosses where thieves hung. Above his head “Kings of the Jews” is written in Greek, Latin, and Hebrew. Jesus’ side abdomen is pierced and blood drips from his hands and feet onto the women mourners from Jerusalem. The center cross,

⁸ Alain Locke, *Negro Art in America* (New York: Penguin Books, 1929), 19.

anchored by the rock is covered with dripping blood from his feet. In this rendering, the crown of thorns has been completely omitted. Woodruff uses the sky and the clouds as semaphores for the saints' spiritual ascendance into heaven upon his death.

It is difficult, in all three panels, to get an accurate sense of the tonal colors used. The mural has been damaged over the years from excessive exposure to humidity and water from the leaking roof. Moisture has also settled into the plaster that anchors the canvas to the interior wall of the sanctuary.

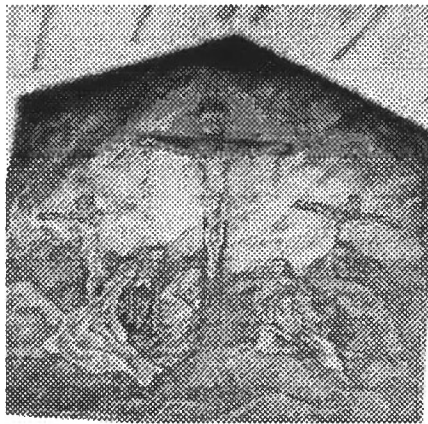


Fig. 5-6. **Wheat Street Murals: *Crucifixion***, Panel III. Wheat Street Baptist Church Atlanta, Georgia, *Source*: Photo by author.

Originally the murals were installed as a triptych in the following order: *Baptism of John, Crucifixion, and The Last Supper*.⁹ Several years later, according to Eugene Jackson, the current Business Manager at Wheat Street, Reverend Borders was not satisfied with the order. At the request of Borders, the panels of the mural were rearranged to reflect the chronological order in which the Biblical events occurred and to also accommodate the newly installed windpipes of the organ. Currently, the panels hang in the following order: Panel One – *The Baptism of John*, Panel Two – *The Last Supper*

⁹ Ibid.

and finally, Panel Three - *The Crucifixion*. All panels originally hung in the center of the main sanctuary on a western wall that faces outward to the congregation. The first and third panels were moved to a southern wall, which leaves Panel Two, *The Crucifixion*, in its original location. Panel three, was moved to the position of Panel two on the southern wall, which when viewed from the congregation appears to the left.

Surprisingly, Woodruff does not mention the Wheat Street murals as one of his celebrated works. Maybe Woodruff recognized his representation of Jesus in this mural as non-universal, which he considered a factor for the continual psychological oppression of African Americans.

The History of California, Settlement and Development (Panel II)

Contrary to popular impressions, African-American businesses during Reconstruction often aspired to play a major role in the cultural life of their communities. By doing so, they helped to improve the neighborhoods in which they were lived, providing support and accepting responsibility to stimulate all aspects of community development. Additionally, African-American artists sought to compare their own values with “elements of vigor, social protest and group consciousness inherent in the paintings and sculpture . . . [that enhance] understanding of the life and thought of the Negro people.”¹⁰

In 1948, Hale Woodruff consulted with Charles Alston to work on a mural project for the Golden State Mutual Life Insurance Company in California. The company, a prominent black-owned business, wanted a visual record of the contributions

¹⁰ Floyd Coleman, “Historical Murals,” *Walls of Heritage, Walls of Pride* (Los Angeles: Golden State Mutual Life Insurance Company, 2000), 4.

made by African Americans to the development of the state of California. Librarian Miriam Matthews had already completed the research for this project when Woodruff and Alston arrived in Los Angeles. Both artists reviewed the material and began working to complete the visual research, and both were asked to choose a period to be portrayed in separate panels. Alston selected *Exploration and Colonization* and Woodruff chose *Settlement and Development* (refer to Fig. 5-7, p. 103). These murals were to be historical, and the challenge was how to recreate so many varied activities covering such a large span of time and still maintain an aesthetic cohesion.¹¹

By miniaturizing the landscape, the artists were able to play with the proportions of the figures. The two worked closely on the project, so that if one were to place the murals side by side, a diptych would result from the union. The artists were able to coordinate their colors and style of painting such that the murals enhanced the design of the lobby of the Golden State Life Insurance building and overall flow of the architecture. Each panel measures nine feet four inches by sixteen feet five inches.

Because of their love for history, Woodruff and Alston agreed on the name (refer to Fig. 5-8, p. 105) *The Negro in California History*. Painted in 1948-49 *Settlement and Development* (Panel Two) would become Woodruff's sixth mural. This mural is housed in the Golden State Life Insurance Building in Los Angeles, California and depicts the African-American participation in the building of the Golden Gate Bridge, the Boulder Dam, and other significant businesses in the region.

¹¹ Gylbert Coker, *Hale Woodruff Fifty Years of His Art; Art as History and Epic: The Murals* (New York: Studio Museum in Harlem, 1979), 69.

Woodruff approached this mural fundamentally the same way he did the Talladega mural a decade earlier. It is a historic, figurative, and realistic painting. *Settlement and Development* presented new challenges, such as the addition of more episodes, and many were widely separated in time and place, therefore they had to be accommodated and the resulting population of figures greatly increased. It became necessary to stack or layer the events shown, thereby sacrificing single point perspective. Texts had to be introduced to help guide viewers' understanding of the overlapping story elements, and a certain sense of crowding ultimately became inescapable. Nevertheless, the mural reads clearly from left to right. In the distant upper corner, gold miners with their oxen pause outside the mineshafts. The gold-mining industry spawned many African-American mine owners and specialists such as goldsmiths and jewelry makers to migrate west. These African-American miners sent more than a million dollars to the South to purchase or gain freedom for family and friends.

To the immediate right of the miners is Captain William Shorey whose whaling ship appears on the ocean behind him. Shorey mastered whaling vessels in the Pacific Ocean in the late nineteenth century. Also in the rear but still further right, African-American workmen are busy constructing Boulder Dam.

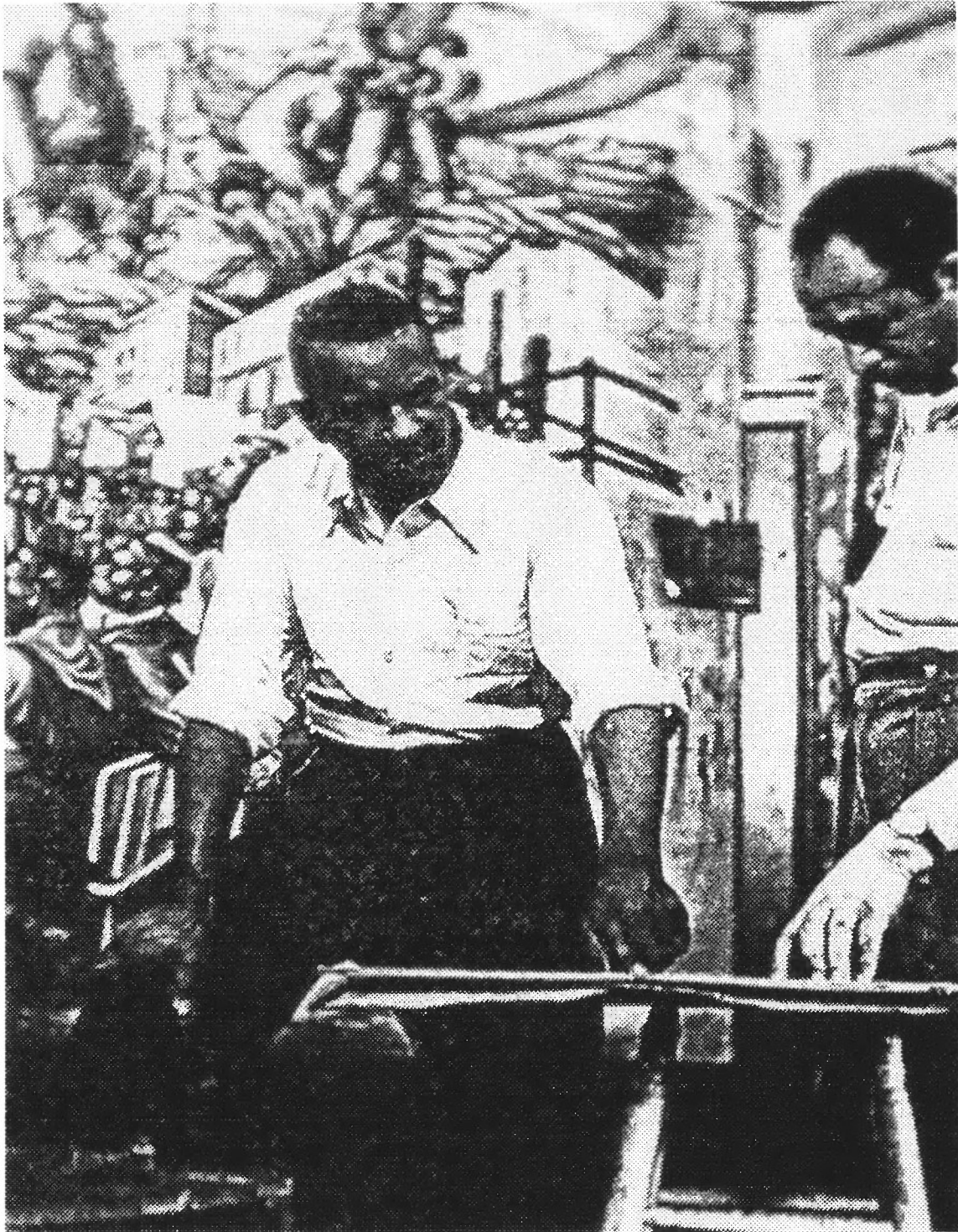


Fig. 5-7. Woodruff and Alston comparing notes for mural Negro in California History: *Exploration and Colonization* (Panel I) and *Settlement and Development* (Panel II). Source: Amistad Research Center, New Orleans, LA.

The San Francisco Bridge, under construction by African-American workers, completes the right portion of the rear ground.¹² In the middle ground on the left, the office of *The Elevator*, a militant African-American newspaper of the 1860s is evident. Its staff is at work beneath a marquee with the subtitle *A Weekly Journal of Progress*. Though California joined the Union in 1850 as a free state, minorities were routinely discriminated against and subjected to racially motivated injustice. Against this background, the Convention of Colored Citizens was formed in 1855 in San Francisco and, along with *The Elevator*, led the struggle for fairness and justice in the Golden State.¹³

Immediately below *The Elevator*, and along the foreground, soldiers protect the transcontinental railroad crews and cargo. African-American regiments of the 9th and 10th cavalries and of the 24th and 25th infantry units of the United States Army provided necessary protection from Amerindians and bandits as the railroad moved west. Wearing a head scarf, Mammy Wright, a civil rights militant and contributor of \$30,000 to finance anti-slavery initiatives, including John Brown's revolt at Harper's Ferry, stands with one of her beneficiaries. Behind them John Brown, gun in hand, stands boldly. A little distance past the saloon along a street in the middle ground is the Pony Express office. An African American carries his mail-pouch over his arm. Over its brief life, a number of African-American horsemen served the Pony Express.¹⁴

¹² Edmund Gaither, *A Shared Heritage: Art by Four African Americans* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996), 137.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.



Fig. 5-8. Negro in California History: *Settlement & Development, Panel II*. Golden State Life Ins. Co. Los Angeles, California. Source: "A Shared Heritage" by Taylor and Warkel.

Bringing both the middle and foreground together, the next passage of the mural celebrates the activist role played by the Convention of Colored Citizens of California. In front of its banner, protestors raise placards saying "Open Schools for our Children"

and “Justice Under the Law.” Work on the Golden State Mutual Building fills the remaining portion of the right side of the mural, where African Americans are evident in the architectural and construction teams.¹⁵

A year after the completion of the California mural, Woodruff received the commission for which he had been waiting. He was to paint a series of six murals at the Atlanta University Library. Since the Talladega murals in 1939, Woodruff had longed to provide the students and visitors at Atlanta University with images of their own cultural past, and finally, in 1950, he was able to fill that desire.¹⁶ When asked about the importance of *Art of the Negro*, Woodruff states:

It is important for this reason; I think it represents my work as an artist. I worked on it night after night, after I got finished with my teaching responsibilities, and in about three months I had the whole series done. I had spent all my life studying African art – the symbols and styles and all the rest – so this was easy to evolve. I broke it down into six kinds of interpretations: African art as a basic element in the lines of African people; the influence of African art on the Greeks, the Romans, and the Egyptians in antiquity; the destruction of African art by Europeans, and so on down the line. I had another reason for doing that mural; to present a subject – African art, our own heritage – to those students at Atlanta University who had little if any knowledge of it.¹⁷

In Akua McDaniel’s text, *Reexamining Hale Woodruff’s Talladega College and Atlanta University Murals*, Coker states:

In many ways, ‘Art of the Negro’ is a composite of Woodruff’s stylistic history since the panels include all of the aesthetic influences that shaped him as an artist. Woodruff’s decision to incorporate the building’s arches into his overall design, may have been inspired by Rivera’s masterful use of arches as brackets to separate Mexican historical eras in his ‘History of Mexico’ murals. In the same way that Woodruff was influenced by Rivera’s organization of space,

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Coker, 69.

¹⁷ Hale Woodruff, Interview by Albert Murray, August 1978, tape 1, John Hewitt Papers Schomburg Collection, New York.

he seems to have also been influenced by the Mexican muralist's approach to content. Rivera felt that his murals should educate the country's youth and in doing so, they would come to know the "figures of great thought, and knowing them would cultivate the holy attitude of veneration."¹⁸

Woodruff's stated purpose for presenting a panorama of African art mirrors his intent, for in conceptualizing the murals he, too, hoped that students and visitors to Atlanta University [would become acquainted] with images of their own cultural past.¹⁹

Art of the Negro

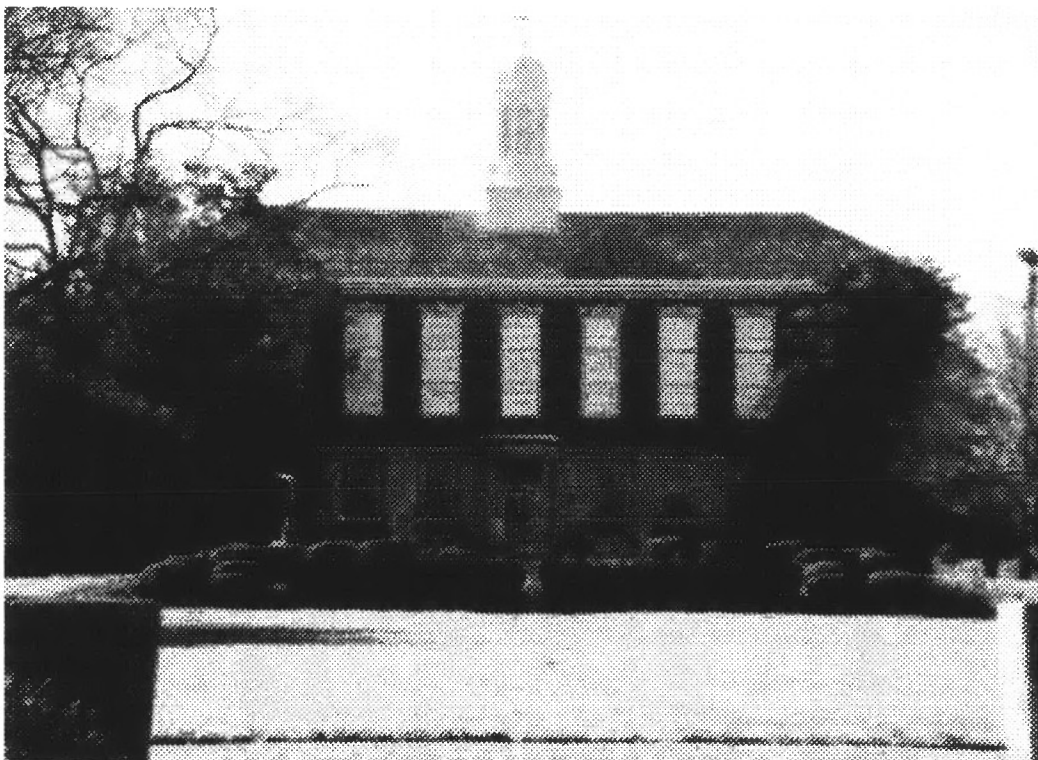


Fig. 5-9. Trevor-Arnett Library, Clark Atlanta University Art Galleries, Atlanta, Georgia.
Source: Photo by author.

The *Art of the Negro* murals, completed in 1951, are Woodruff's finest and most aesthetically resolved. They bring together his interest in African art and his growing

¹⁸ Akua McDaniel. *Reexamining Hale Woodruff's Talladega College and Atlanta University Murals* quoted in The International African American Art in Review vol. 12, no.4, p.16.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

association with abstract expressionism. Mary Schmidt Campbell, former Director of the Studio Museum in Harlem states:

Although in 1952, there was nothing in black American art comparable to the Atlanta University murals in their effort to place African American art in a large cultural context, the murals have gone virtually ignored since they were installed. They have never been discussed or reproduced in any text on African-American art, though they are certainly more innovative than the *Talladega Murals* and more relevant to Woodruff's mature paintings.²⁰

After completion of the Talladega murals, Woodruff suggested to President Rufus Clement the installation of a mural series at Atlanta University. The offer was not accepted initially and Woodruff dropped the matter, but would later share his vision about the Atlanta murals again with Clement. In the meantime, Woodruff's style of painting changed during this period and it included a great interest in African art. As a result of his interest in African art, Woodruff was beginning to display formal symbols of African expression in his work. Describing his intentions for the murals, he states: "I want the [Atlanta University] murals to be an inspiration to students who go to the library, to see something about the art of their ancestors."²¹ *Art of the Negro*, as the series of six panels is called, seeks to capture the interplay between African art and other great cultural traditions of the world. In the tradition of Alain Locke and W. E. B. Du Bois, Woodruff located Africa's art as existing in a dynamic relationship with Western and non-Western artistic heritages. *Art of the Negro* (refer to fig 5-9, p. 108) is installed in the arched recesses of the upper rotunda of Trevor-Arnett Library and has the

²⁰ McDaniel, 16.

²¹ "Hale Woodruff personal papers" (New York: Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture), 9.

following individual subtitles: *Native Forms, Interchange, Dissipation, Parallels, Influences and Artists.*

Woodruff, in a taped interview offered this explanation about how the murals came about:

That was my own idea. I had been to Mexico in 1936 to study with Diego Rivera. The Mexican revival in art had begun in the 1920s and they had murals all over the place. The murals in New York in Radio City had just been completed. The Orozco mural at the New School of Social Research in New York had just been completed. So I thought I would like to learn about painting murals and I went to Mexico, studied with Rivera and learned to do fresco and egg tempera painting. When I got back to A. U. I saw the great expanse of empty wall – with nothing on them but dirt. I took the idea to Rufus Clement, the President of the University at that time, and I said to him ‘Rufus, I’d like to put a mural on those library walls’ and he said ‘I don’t know Hale, we’ll have to go to the Trustees on this, but we’ll talk.’ So I went to the librarians (Mrs. Barksdale) and a white woman who was chief librarian and she said ‘Oh no Mr. Woodruff, we’ll never have that done here – destroying and dirtying up our nice clean walls.’²²

After his conversation with the librarian, Woodruff approached President Clement again in 1938 to discuss the possibility of doing a mural set for Atlanta University. Thus,

Woodruff stated:

How the murals came about is very interesting. I was not on the payroll of Atlanta University. I was, at that time on the payroll of Spelman College. I had been on AU’s payroll when I taught at their Laboratory School for Teacher training. When the Lab School folded, Spelman College took over my services. Rufus Clement said, ‘We don’t have any money, maybe you can take it out of your own hide.’ In the meantime I got fed up with the whole thing. In 1941 or 1942 I received a scholarship from the Rosenwald Foundation and Ted (his wife) got a scholarship from the General Education Board, and we came to New York for two years. Florence Read who was then President of Spelman gave me a leave of absence. When the scholarship ended, I wanted to go to NYU, but that didn’t work out, so I went back to Spelman, but I first wanted Read and Clement to reach an understanding on the mural.²³

²² Hale Woodruff, Interview by Albert Murray, August 1978, tape 1, John Hewitt Papers Schomburg Collection, New York.

²³ “Hale Woodruff personal papers” (New York: Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture), 9.

At the time Woodruff's salary was \$3500 per year at Atlanta University. He agreed to do the murals between classes if his salary were raised by \$2000.

The Trustee Board agreed to give him only a \$200 increase and Woodruff was not satisfied, but started on the murals anyway. In the fall of 1946, Woodruff received a call from Dean Mobley of New York University offering him \$4600 as an associate professor. Woodruff accepted the offer, he left for New York City, and the mural was placed on hold. It is important to note that, according to Woodruff, 'Spelman never accepted my resignation.'²⁴ Then, during one of Rufus Clements' visits to New York, he met with Woodruff and the discussion of the Atlanta murals was revived. Woodruff agreed to do the murals for the original price of \$2000. He agreed to do the murals if he could change the subject to the *Art of the Negro*. Initially, Woodruff proposed an education theme that included luminaries such as George Washington Carver, Paul Robeson, etc.²⁵

Woodruff completed the murals in his New York apartment. He constructed a nine-foot easel from the floor in a manner that allowed him to place his twelve-foot canvas over them and then roll them up as one would a roll of paper towels. Woodruff worked from sketches, but mostly from his own experiences that were an accumulation of the subject matter. During a taped interview in 1977, Woodruff states: "This is how I completed them, I rolled them up and shipped them to Atlanta. Then I went down to

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Hale Woodruff, Interview by Albert Murray, August 1978, tape 1, John Hewitt Papers Schomburg Collection, New York.

assist and oversee the installation of the murals which now hang in the Trevor-Arnett Library.”²⁶

Woodruff, an intellectual artist as well as educator, was persistent in presenting the murals to the Atlanta University community. He posits: “I had another reason for wanting to do the mural. One was to present a subject – African art, our own heritage – to those students at Atlanta University who had little, if any knowledge of it.”²⁷

Woodruff commented: “There was a long and elaborate three-day celebration that occurred at the installation of the Talladega murals. Since the installation of the Atlanta University murals, they have been basically ignored and treated with indifference.”²⁸

Since the murals do not emphasize slavery, perhaps it may be difficult for African Americans to make the psychological leap to the continent. Woodruff attempts to reconnect viewers with African culture and heritage, which was the sole purpose of doing the mural series. Woodruff laments this of the murals: “The murals don’t deal with the slavery in this country. They deal with a very remote past. Perhaps this is why people have not responded to them. But the Atlanta University murals represent my best work.”²⁹ Woodruff felt that no matter how an artist’s work changed over the years, there was always a common thread running through all of it, something that tied the works together.³⁰ For Woodruff that common thread was concern for his people. He expressed

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Gaither, 132.

strong feelings regarding the purpose of art and its relationship to humanity. Panel one, (refer to Fig. 5-10, p. 114) *Native Forms*, has the greatest concentration of African forms and references. An adaptation of Woodruff's long-treasured Yoruba sculpture figure dominates panel one. The intention of *Native Forms* is to establish the primacy and global impact of African civilization under the bold and emphatic presence of the African Muse. *Native Forms* is a visual poem about cultural origins. Presiding over the mural is a Yoruba deity, Shango, holding a staff and standing atop a base filled with African symbols, including the crocodile, bird, and turtle. To the left, hunters are masquerading as animals dance. To the right, six warriors with masks, shields, and spears advance. Dogon inspired masks are apparent, and beneath the warriors are two sculptors at work. One sits on a stool and carves with a traditional tool. Three closely related passages lie along the lower margin of the panel, all relating to African cave paintings. These images precede the art works of the modern artists such as Henry Moore, the English sculptor and Picasso whose works drew upon indigenous art forms.³¹

Panel two, (refer to Fig. 5-11, p.114) *Interchange*, portrays what Woodruff considers the four major influences on Western culture: Greek, Roman, Egyptian, and Nigerian art. *Interchange* is organized around a series of conversations in which cultural representatives of African, Roman, Greek, and Egyptian traditions exchange cultural ideas and their major influences on Western culture. On the left side of the panel, African and Greek musicians, griots and bards, converse.³² Across, on the right, three African soldiers and Roman soldiers with spears and shields discuss soldiering.

³¹ Coker, 60.

³² Gaither, 139.

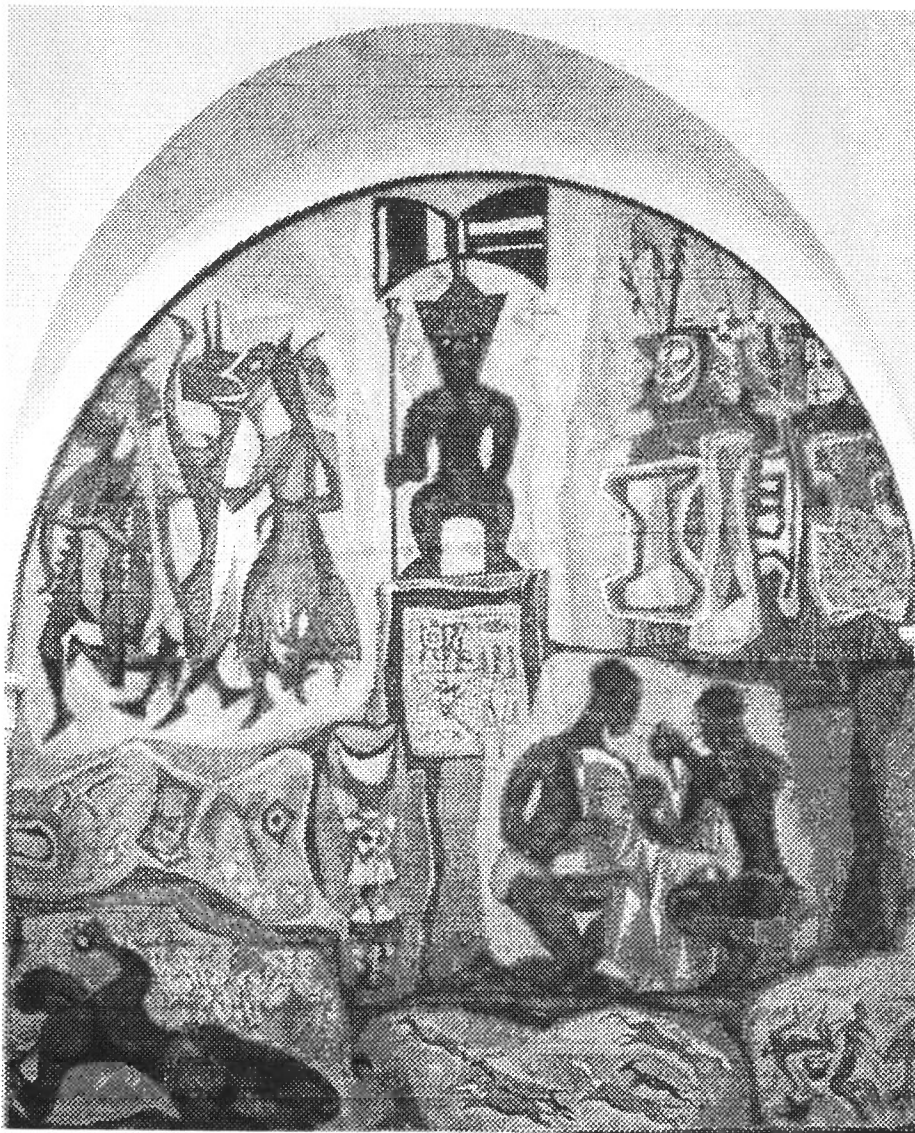


Fig. 5-10. *Art of the Negro (Panel I, Native Forms)*, 1951. Clark Atlanta University Galleries. Atlanta, Georgia. Source: Photo by author.



Fig. 5-11. **Art of the Negro** (Panel II, *Interchange*), 1951. Clark Atlanta University Art Galleries, Atlanta, Georgia. *Source*: Photo by author.

In the foreground next to the Egyptian friezes, three ancient builders confer. Above them are sculptures including a stylized horse. A passage of Egyptian/Nubian hieroglyphics supports architectural features, including Doric and Egyptian columns and a western Sudanic mosque tower. At the right margin of the mural is a Greco-Roman stele or grave marker.³³

The looting and plundering of Benin City by the British in 1897 inspired panel three, *Dissipation* (refer to Fig. 5-12, p.116). *Dissipation* offers a metaphor for the

³³ Ibid.

assault on African art and heritage represented by European colonialism. The Benin Empire, its greatness extending back before the coming of the Portuguese to the West African shores in the 1840s and evidenced by its masterful bronzes and ivories, continued until the late nineteenth century. Shortly after the British marched into Benin City, they occupied it. In the wake of the invasion, soldiers and others took thousands of works of art from the Benin royal treasure to Europe, thereby acquainting Europeans with the figurative bronzes and ivories of a traditional African kingdom.

Woodruff, depicting the plundering of Benin, frames the action of the British soldiers destroying or stealing the sculptures within leaping, engulfing flames and falling city towers. Although the image of the Oba (king), with his ceremonial sword, is visible in front of the falling towers in the left mid-ground, the presence of Senufo and Basonge masks along with Asante combs and Dogon crocodiles confirms that Woodruff's comment is meant to apply to African heritage at large.

Panel four, (refer to Fig. 5-13, p. 117), *Parallels*, addresses cultural vitality. In the upper central portion, Woodruff has given prominence to several North American totemic sculptures, including one showing a stylized figure surmounting a drum. Flanking this totem is a mask with a superstructure and the elaborated sculpture resembling a ceremonial staff. Reminiscent of some ancient Nubian amulets, a Pre-Columbian Mexican figure fills the left corner of the panel. Adjacent to it and falling along the bottom of the picture is a painting showing an Amerindian ritual dancer. Just to the right of the center appears a Sepik River-inspired mask, perhaps symbolizing cultural artifacts from the Pacific Islands.

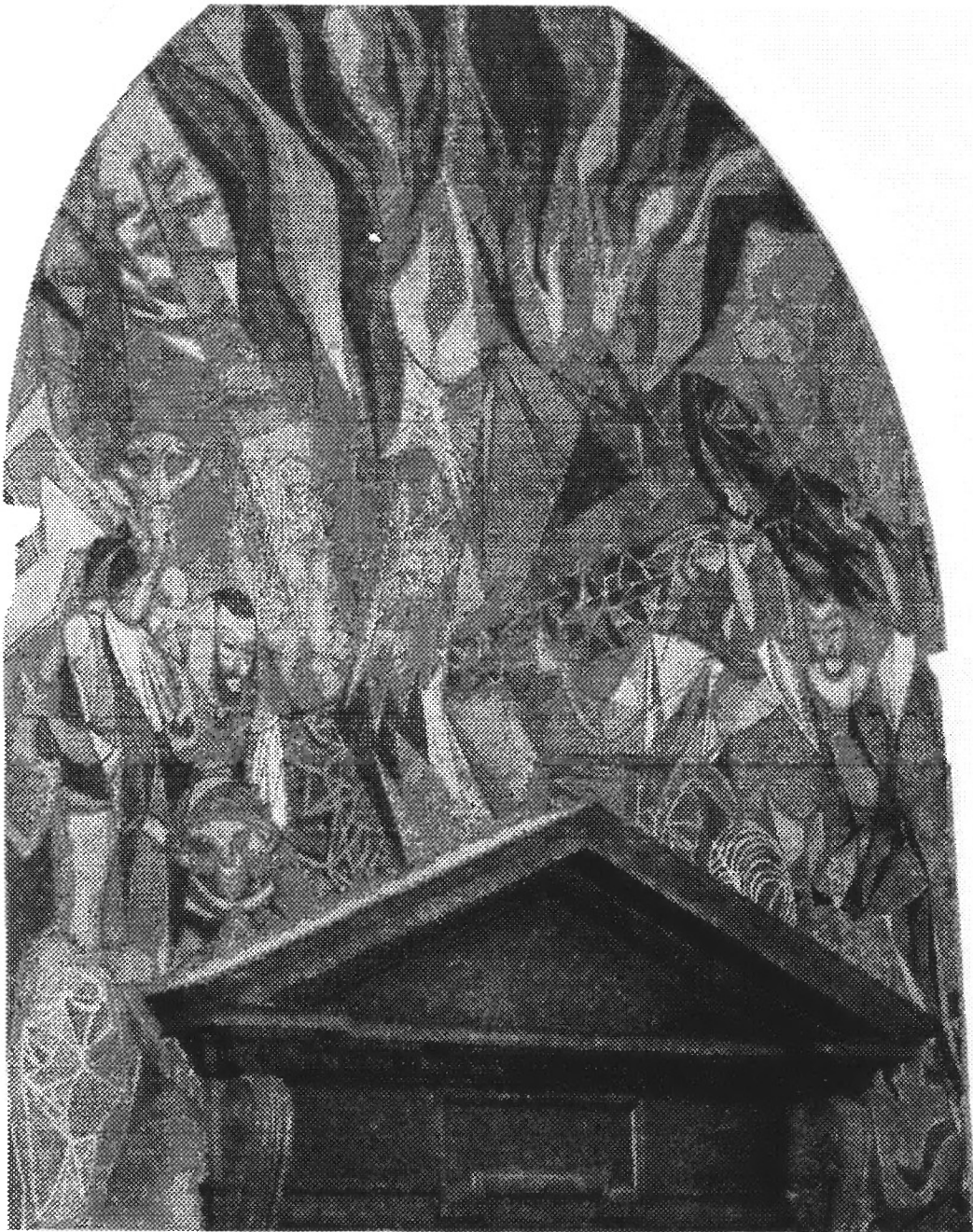


Fig. 5-12. **Art of the Negro** (Panel III, *Dissipation*), 1951. Clark Atlanta University Art Galleries, Atlanta, Georgia. *Source*: Photo by author.

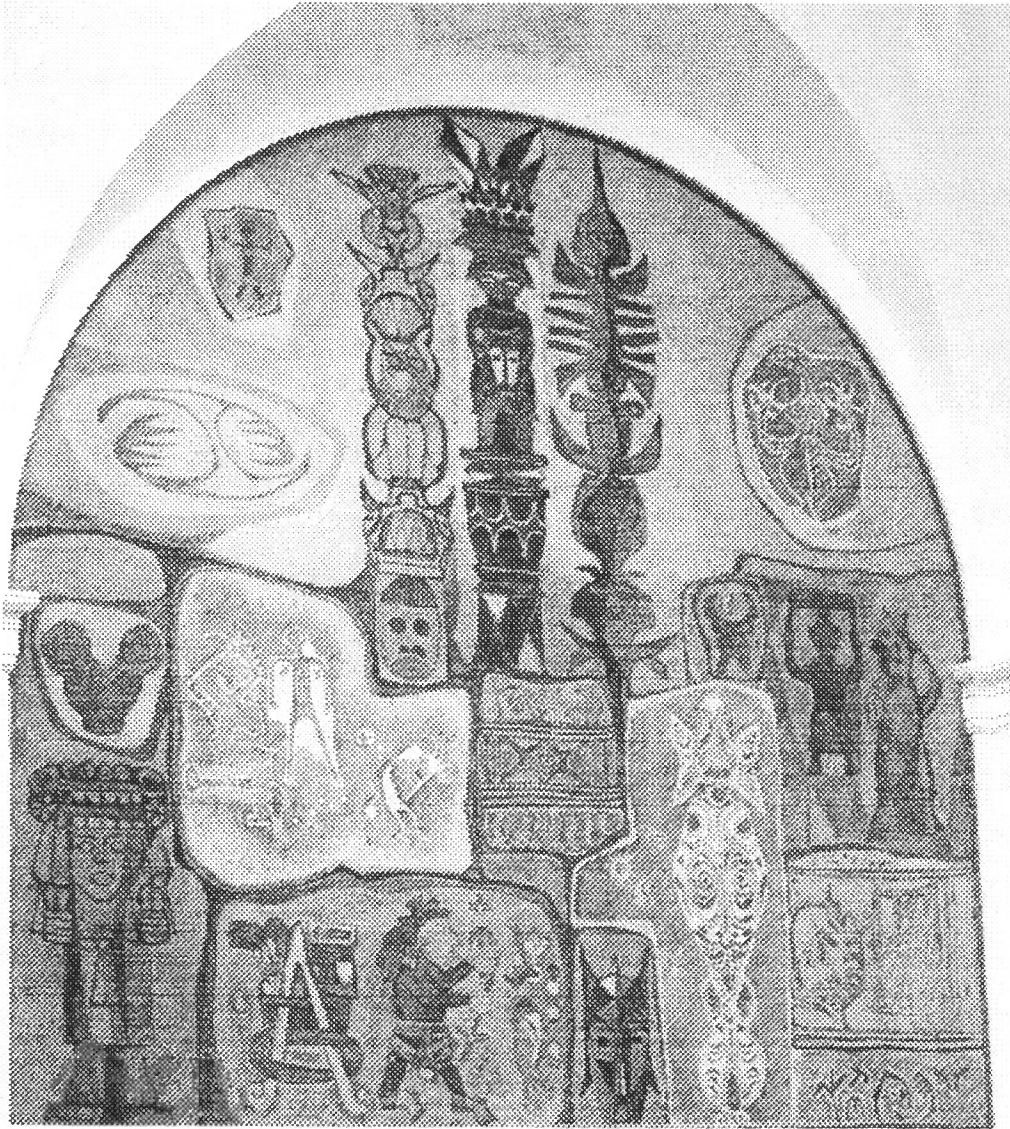


Fig. 5-13. *Art of the Negro* (Panel IV, *Parallels*), 1951. Clark Atlanta University Art Galleries. *Source*: Photo by author.

Interspersed throughout the remainder of the painting are irregular enclosures containing mythic forms, glyphs, and emblems suggesting the heritages of China, Japan, India, and other great civilizations of Asia respectively.

Influences, which is the fifth panel, (refer to Fig. 5-14, p. 120), is a testament of how African art forms not only survived the European onslaught, but also exemplifies their recurrence time and again in African-American and Haitian art. Directly above the

box in the lower left margin is a series of Haitian veves, the sacred writing of voodoo representing the names Loas or lieutenant spirits. These veves are executed with flour and earth and are related to the traditional Haitian sand paintings. Near the center in a narrow vertical box appears a drawing of a female nude, suggesting the origins of cubism, the fundamental movement of modern art. This point is restated in another African sculpture of a female nude at the right margin of the panel. In alternating boxes, subdividing the picture plane, appear paintings in modern abstract tradition and glyphs suggesting cave paintings. The panel asserts that cultural traditions are reciprocal, each giving and receiving new influences and growth through direct encounters. Modern art, in this respect, is a product of the fusion of African formal ideas and Western aesthetics and art practice. Its newness derives from a peculiar parentage rooted in the sustained, intimate cultural contacts generated by global colonialism slavery and capitalism.³⁴

The sixth and final panel, (refer to Fig. 5-15, p. 121) *Artists*, presents an international panorama of seventeen eminent artists of African descent. In the upper register, the African and Western muses sit together symbolically, undoubtedly exchanging ideas on beauty and truth contained in Greco-Roman and African cultural practices. Beneath them, seventeen African-American artists, heirs to both traditions, are assembled. These creative figures symbolize the cultural backgrounds from which artists of the world have come. On the rear rows from the left to right are Joshua Johnston, the Baltimore Limner; Henry O. Tanner, the most celebrated of nineteenth century African-American artists; Jacob Lawrence, contemporary inventor of the serialized mural; Edward Mitchell Bannister, bronze medal winner at the 1876

³⁴ Ibid. , 141.



Fig. 5-14. *Art of the Negro* (Panel V, *Influences*), 1951. Clark Atlanta University Art Galleries, Atlanta, Georgia. *Source*: Photo by author.

Centennial Exhibition; Nada Kane, South African cave painter; Julien Hudson, nineteenth-century portraitist; Juan De Pareja, school of Velazquez; Patrick Reason, portraitist of the abolitionist; S. Gomez, school of Murillo; Antonio Francisco Lisboa, Aleijadinho (The Little Cripple), eighteenth-century sculptor; Iqueigha, thirteenth-century sculptor; Horace Pippin, self-taught master; Sargent Johnson, African-inspired twentieth sculptor; Charles Alston, muralist, painter, and sculptor; Hector Hypolite, mid-

century Haitian master painter; Robert S. Duncanson, nineteenth-century landscapist and first African-American artist to achieve international recognition; and Richmond Barthe, sculptor.³⁵

Together, this assembly is a tribute to the continuity and expansion of African and African-American art throughout the world. *Art of the Negro* is Woodruff's most celebrated mural, a definitive integration of the myriad influences promoting modernism and abstraction with the desire to teach the lessons of African and African-American history and reclaim the credit due to African artistic ancestors.

³⁵ Ibid.

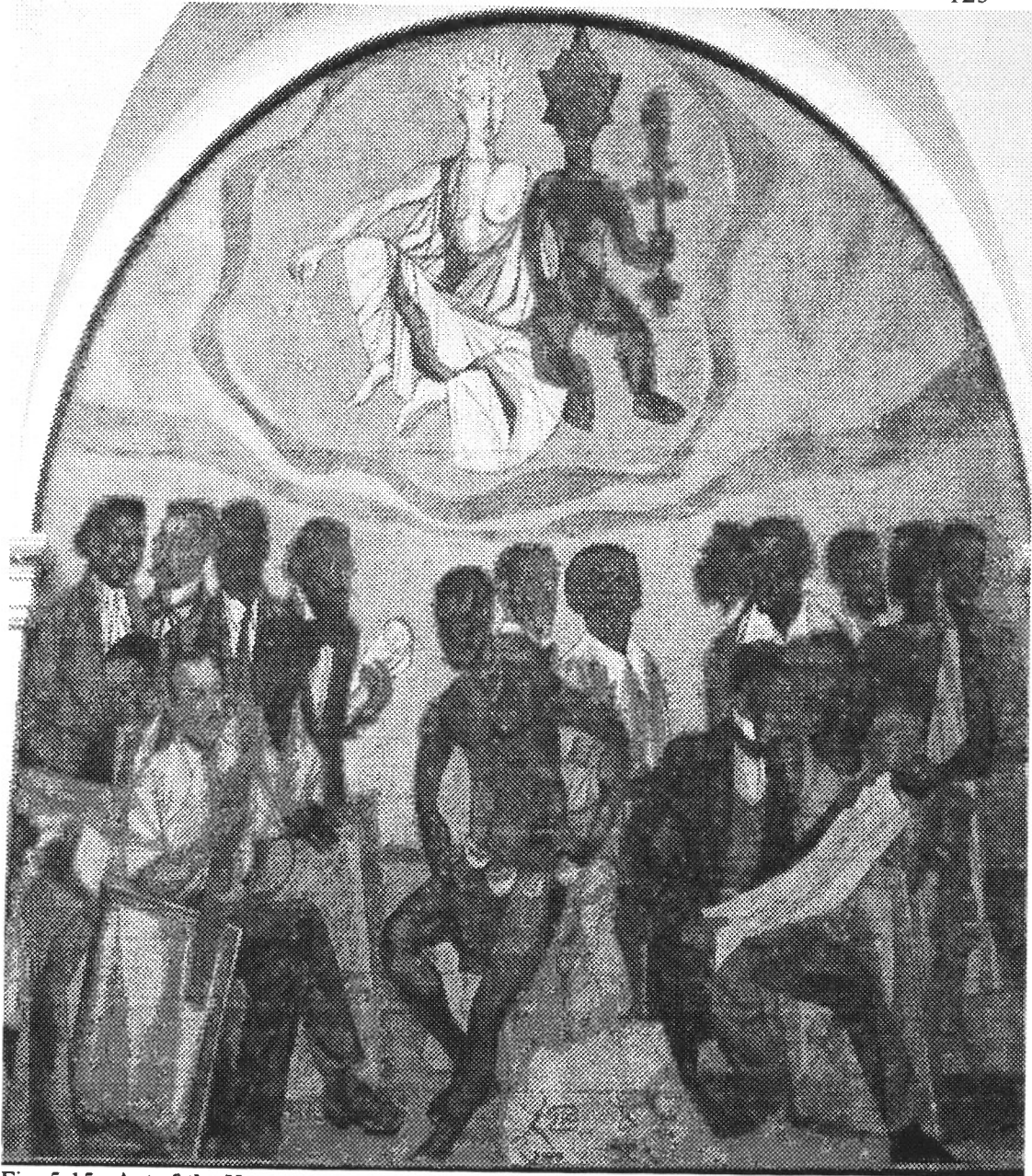


Fig. 5-15. **Art of the Negro** (Panel VI, *Artists*) 1951. Clark Atlanta University Art Galleries.
Source: Photo by author.

CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

Woodruff's contributions to the evolution of African-American Art are evident in his many artistic works. The murals, however, serve as a historical testament to the significant global contributions of Africans in the Diaspora. *Art of the Negro* is the most aesthetically resolved of Woodruff's mural series, and probably it is the most misunderstood for two reasons. First, this mural series does not deal with slavery in the United States. Secondly, the subject matter is from a very remote past and far from the experiences of many African Americans. Psychologically, African Americans cannot make the leap from America to Africa. The connection was lost during the journey through the middle passage. Woodruff concludes that this could be yet another reason why "our" people have not responded to them. As this mural does not deal with slavery in the United States, Woodruff reasons this as a major contributing factor for *Art of the Negro* being less celebrated. The Talladega Murals, however, depict slavery and represent defiance, revolution, and liberation and as a result, have become the most celebrated and popular of his mural series. Put simply, contemporary African-American artists can more readily identify with this mural series in their daily struggle, Woodruff believed.

In an effort to identify with the remote past, “Many of our young black artists today draw masks or those who don’t know any better wear dashikis and Afro haircuts and African jewelry. This is a kind of hero worship, but being artists they should be interested in how African artists work, not what they do. They should focus on the basic qualities of art,”¹ states Woodruff. He explains this technique of emotionally transferring energy to the canvas as *Artistic Distance*.

During an interview in 1968, Woodruff states this about transference:

‘What is required is what is called a certain amount of “artistic distance.” In other words, to get at a thing, you’ve got to get away from it, and then come to it in your own terms. You know, I can go out on the street and become involved in protest picketing and what not, but this has nothing to do with painting a picture about the protest that is being made. This protest can be done by shouting or haranguing, or whatever, on the one hand. But, if one is going to make this protest through pictures, then this is another medium and is not the same thing. This I think is what the young artist involved today should really consider.’²

Woodruff believed that there was no right or wrong way to approach a subject for painting. Each artist approaches the subject on his own terms. This is what makes the artist unique.

The *Annual* was conceived to showcase and highlight works of unique African-Americans artists from all across the United States, who otherwise had no formal venue at which to exhibit. To broaden awareness of his students, Woodruff arranged for major art shows at the Atlanta University Center. He encouraged students to exhibit and compete in this annual student exhibition. Among his most noted achievements was the

¹ “Hale Woodruff personal papers” (New York: Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture), 6.

² Ibid.

establishment of the Atlanta University Annual Exhibition of paintings, sculpture, and prints by Negro Artists. This national juried competition for new and established artists was held from 1942 through 1970, to provide a venue and recognition for Negro artists during a period when opportunities were greatly restricted due to segregation and discrimination practices in the United States. Through these exhibitions, many artists received national exposure and Atlanta University—now Clark Atlanta University—developed one of the most prestigious collections of art by African Americans under Woodruff's guidance. In addition to initiating the *Annual*, he is also responsible for building one of the premier African-American art collections in the United States. Woodruff, a forerunner to the Black Arts Movement, could assuredly be known as a founding father of the Arts Movement in the South.

Woodruff joined the faculty of Atlanta University in 1931, making him the second, highly trained African-American artist to teach art in the Atlanta University Center. At the turn of the twentieth century, Henry Ossawa Tanner taught art at Clark University (later Clark College and now Clark Atlanta University). Woodruff developed an art curriculum and built a strong art faculty that attracted students and brought national recognition to the Atlanta University Center.

Through this recognition, Woodruff's students became nationally known as the "Outhouse School." This name was given to his students because they often painted the surrounding landscapes of the Atlanta University community, which were dotted with "Outhouses" – a southern term used to describe outdoor latrines. Woodruff most recently

has been credited with establishing the first formal arts training program for blacks in the South and possibly the first in the United States.

Woodruff and his "*Outhouse School*" were predecessors of the Black Arts Movement. The Black Aesthetic is often referred to as a system designed for isolating and evaluating the artistic works of black people, which reflect the special character and imperatives of the Black Experience. If this is so, then Woodruff was a harbinger of the Black Arts Movement in Atlanta with the inception of the *Atlanta University Annual* in 1942. This thesis is important because it places Woodruff in the context of beginning an important initiative, which created additional opportunities and exposure for many artists who might have gone unrecognized.

Other important works by Woodruff include his paintings and woodcuts. Woodruff was particularly concerned with the social and economic well-being of African Americans. His genuine concern can be substantiated throughout his career, beginning with his high school years when he was the editorial cartoonist for his school newspaper, *The Pearl High Voice*. While serving as a cartoonist, he focused on the oppressive and discriminatory injustices blacks faced in the South. Later in his career, Woodruff created a series of woodcuts that depicted the recurring lynchings prevalent throughout the South.

Still, Woodruff's venture in the genre of mural painting is significant. His murals express a powerful aesthetic grounded in social consciousness. These murals have graduated from being wall decorations to becoming African-centered modernist works of art. His contributions to the African-American aesthetic are significant because they illumine the important contributions of African Americans to the society at large, while

proving and documenting the African American's capability to produce splendid works of art. Although he was trained in creating frescoes, Woodruff utilized the canvas as the medium on which to display his murals, which were then attached to the wall surface when completed. However, his contemporaries painted their murals directly on the surface of the wall, possibly making Woodruff the only artist in the South to use this method.

Woodruff has advanced the discipline of African-American studies by mentoring and inspiring an entire generation of artists dedicated to the interpretation of the African-American experience. Woodruff taught a generation of students to bring their own personal experiences to the canvas, and, in doing so, has created a shift from the generation of artists who painted about protest and petition (civil rights), to a generation of artists concerned with empowerment, thus, leading to the Black Power Movement. Put simply, Woodruff was an artistic prophet who proclaimed to the world the untapped, unrecognized, and uncelebrated talent of the Negro artist and worked incessantly to assure that one day, such talent would change the world. Because of his effort, the manifestation of his dream is simply a matter of time. This is important because it appropriately places Woodruff in the proper context and recognizes him as an educator, artist, painter and printmaker.

In conclusion, Woodruff's suppression in the American art canon is attributed to racism and segregation, two factors that, in part, spurred this research. This, however, is only part of the problem. There is also the matter of gender and Woodruff's omission of women from his tribute to significant artists' of African heritage. As noted in Panel VI,

titled “Artists,” of Woodruff’s mural project *Art of the Negro*, women are noticeably absent from the canvas. Certainly there were women between the thirteenth and twentieth centuries who made significant contributions, not only in the field of education and art instruction, but who were also master artists of their craft. To name a few, Nancy Elizabeth Prophet, art educator and noted sculptress (1890- 1960), who had studied and worked in France for over ten years, taught during the same time as Woodruff at Atlanta University; Augusta Savage, sculptress (1892-1962), opened community art schools, and her subjects became hallmarks of her heroic portrayal in bronze, plaster and clay; Edmonia Lewis, sculptress (1845-1911), was the first neoclassical sculptor of color to gain an international reputation, and she was best known for her works which reflect her dual African-American and Native-American heritage. Woodruff’s exclusion of women from the aesthetic is a subject for future exploration by other scholars.

Recommendations

The researcher strongly recommends the following for preservation of Woodruff’s works: (1) preserve the Wheat Street Murals – in an effort to conserve and preserve Woodruff’s *Wheat Street Murals*, the researcher submitted recommendations to the business manager of Wheat Street Baptist Church in Atlanta, Georgia. These priceless murals are in desperate need of cleaning and restoring before further decay occurs; this maintenance is vital for the preservation of these aesthetic treasures. As a researcher and historian, the writer has the obligation in part to explain the importance of safeguarding and restoring artifacts that give insight into the past. Without proper care, these artifacts might eventually disappear taking whatever historical value they have with

them, (2) include Woodruff in the general art curriculum in American education – a comprehensive plan should be developed and implemented that is inclusive of Woodruff in the academic arts curriculum in American education. This plan in scope should include elementary, high schools, as well as colleges and universities. Since most public and private school systems now emphasize diversity in their school curriculums, this would be an appropriate forum in which to introduce this concept, (3) Woodruff's murals, especially *Art of the Negro*, be included in black cultural events such as the Annual Black Arts festival in Atlanta – this venue would serve as an excellent introduction of Woodruff to students and the American public. It is important for African Americans to document their historical past both written and by using electronic mediums such as videos and DVDs to transmit their stories orally and in their own voices.

Woodruff's works are certainly deserving of a documentary, which Eugene Grigsby, a former student of Hale Woodruff stated,

Hale called me one day and asked if I would write his biography. I told him that I didn't think I was up to it. Years later I asked him if he were still interested in me doing that project and he said 'No.' I wished I had done it when he asked me the first time.³

Grigsby believes that our stories are like pieces of a puzzle, each piece offering clues about our past.

Furthermore, Woodruff attested repeatedly to the importance of documenting and preserving our history if we are to empower self and the African-American community. In retrospect, Woodruff's life is evidence that the recording of history is important and,

³ Eugene Grigsby, Interview by Nacoleon Hillsman, Charlotte, NC, 2 February 2001.

by doing so he has offered tangible links to our past. In other words, he successfully captured history for inclusion in the American art canon. Woodruff dedicated his life to ensuring that an accurate portrayal of our history was presented to students, not only at Atlanta University, but also in other places where his murals currently reside.



Fig. 6-1. Hale Woodruff 1900-1980

Source: Clark Atlanta University Art Galleries Photo Archives.

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