



**THE HARMON AND HARRIET KELLEY
COLLECTION OF AFRICAN AMERICAN ART**

WORKS ON PAPER

STUDENT RESPONSE ESSAYS

August 28–October 28, 2007

**The Harmon and Harriet Kelley Collection
of African American Art: Works on Paper
and Selections from the AT&T Art Collection**

The College of Wooster Art Museum

Sussel Gallery and the Burton D. Morgan Gallery
Ebert Art Center

Cover: Romare Bearden (1911–1988)

Conjunction, 1979

lithograph

28 x 22 inches

The Harmon and Harriet Kelley

Collection of African American Art

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This brochure is comprised of seven essays written by College of Wooster students enrolled in the Fall 2007, *African American Art* class taught by Associate Professor of Art History, John Siewert.

Professor Siewert asked each student in his class to produce a written response to a work in the exhibition, *The Harmon and Harriet Kelley Collection of African American Art and Selections from the AT&T Art Collection*. Seven essays were then selected for publication in this brochure.

I thank both John Siewert for incorporating this exhibition into the classroom experience and the students in his class for their thoughtful essays.

Kitty McManus Zurko
Director/Curator
The College of Wooster
Art Museum



Romare Bearden (1911–1988)

Morning, 1979

lithograph

21 1/2 x 28 inches

The Buzz and Reggie Williams

Collection of African American Art

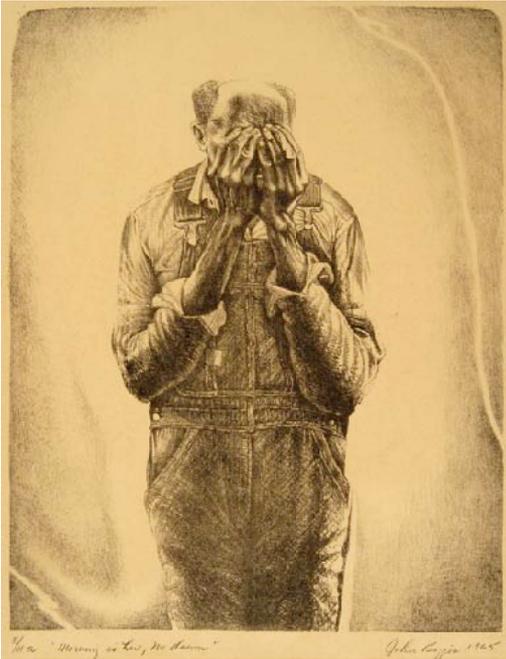
Romare Bearden's 1979 lithograph, **Morning**, is an excellent example of the artist's shift toward collage during the 1960s and his recurring images of the family situated in the home. With its vibrant colors and fragmented figures, this print features a domestic scene with a mother and child seated at a kitchen table. The dark-skinned mother wears a pink kerchief and leans toward her little girl, wrapping her arms around the child. The girl, with pink eyes and a yellow kerchief,

furrows her brow and seems to pull away slightly. Bearden often used such figures to represent African American culture.

Bearden's intricate use of color and shapes tend to create an all-over pattern, although here the focal point is a vase of bright flowers and the fruit that spills out onto the table. Upon closer examination, one notices subtle details that reinforce the importance of the home in African American culture. In the foreground, Bearden placed a rocking chair with a cloth draped over the side and a basket filled with linens; and, in the background are a mop and bucket and a potbellied stove. Cumulatively, these objects suggest the realm of the traditional African American family.

Bearden's collage methods reflect a wide range of influences, including traditional African art, African American quilting, and jazz. **Morning** captures these influences through its use of vibrant colors, the incorporation of the gingham cloth on the child's lap, and the improvisational feeling that the collage creates. Color plays an important role in traditional African art, and this can certainly be seen in this lithograph and almost all of Bearden's other works. He also often includes fragments of checkered gingham cloth in his work as a referent to African American quilting. Here we not only see the presence of the gingham cloth on the child's lap but also the presence of various other linens and cloths draped over furniture and resting in baskets. Finally, Bearden's fragmented and fractured style is also often linked to the creative and improvisational components of jazz and blues music, both significant facets of African American history and culture.

Alex St. John '08
French



John Thomas Biggers (1924–2001)

Morning is Here, No Dawn, 1965

lithograph

17 3/4 x 13 3/4 inches

The Harmon and Harriet Kelley

Collection of African American Art

John Thomas Biggers was an African American artist working in the 1950s and 1960s. Primarily a muralist, Biggers was profoundly influenced by his cultural upbringing as an African American during the civil rights era. Biggers made heavy use of symbolism from his childhood in North Carolina in his murals, hoping to illustrate his own interpretation of the lives

and, more importantly, the hardships of being black in a white man's world. Biggers was, first and foremost, a muralist, which makes the lithograph, **Morning Is Here, No Dawn**, all the more poignant. That he would single out this subject of a working man, covering his face with his hands, is a powerful statement of the sorrow and despair that perhaps even Biggers could not hide. Devoid of any artistic flourishes or color to enhance his statement, this print is painfully realistic; its sketch-like quality, like a snapshot, conveys the image of a man overcome with an emotion so powerful that he tries to bury it in his hands.

They say you can tell a working man by his hands, so it is more than appropriate that the focus of the piece should be on the man's hands. These beautiful, strong, yet bone-thin hands, are drawn to his face, covering it. Why cover his face? Is it because he is ashamed of his poverty? Or is he just exhausted? The wrinkles in his forehead indicate the anguish he feels, but his hands—worn, bony, and irreversibly bent—speak volumes about a man presented with overwhelming difficulty. His pain is contained in each finger, bone, and muscle. His existence revolves around these hands, for it is on them that his livelihood depends. And it is within these hands that he finds momentary refuge from the world he sees, one of back-breaking work and no easy victories.

The simplicity of the subject and the sepia tone juxtaposed with the detailed sketching of the figure point to a deeper complexity of this man's existence. His life is about so much more than the simple depiction of an impoverished man in overalls; his purpose is so much greater than this working man's life. Biggers knows that such a life can break a man, and so the artist shows us a man standing on the brink.

Julia Dann '10
Latin American Studies



John Thomas Biggers (1924–2001)

Morning is Here, No Dawn, 1965

lithograph

17 3/4 x 13 3/4 inches

The Harmon and Harriet Kelley

Collection of African American Art

John Thomas Biggers is perhaps best known for his African themed murals, which he painted during his career as the founding chairman of the art department at Texas Southern University. Similar to Wooster's Independent Study experience, Biggers designed a program at TSU where senior art majors were required to complete a mural on

campus. As a result of his excellent work as a professor, he received the opportunity to travel to Africa to study African traditions and cultures. It was there that he derived the themes for many of his works.

In **Morning Is Here, No Dawn**, 1965, an African American man wearing overalls covers his face with his hands. The figure is rendered in a realistic, almost sculptural manner. By reading the man's body language, the viewer perceives his misery and hopelessness. We are explicitly given the figure to focus on which was a common practice of twentieth century African American art.

Biggers' reasons for illustrating the figure this way could be related to the year this print was made, as he would have been attentive to the civil rights movement whose goal was to abolish racial discrimination of African Americans. In 1965, "Bloody Sunday" occurred in Selma, Alabama. African Americans protesting their lack of voting rights attempted to march from Selma to Montgomery; but instead of marching, they were violently gassed and beaten by police. Although the 13th Amendment had been passed a century earlier to abolish slavery and give minimal citizenship to former slaves, it wasn't until the 1950s and 1960s that further amendments were enacted to ensure change. Some historians labeled these decades the "second reconstruction period."

It is with this history in mind that the title of this lithograph begins to become clear. In 1965, life was not becoming any easier for African Americans as they dealt daily with racism, poverty, and discrimination. Biggers' own life was not lacking in adversity, and neither is his drawing of the suffering man. In looking, we are meant to confront the reality that many African Americans experience.



Claude Clark (1914–1985)

Rain, n. d.

offset lithograph

15 3/4 x 20 inches

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Collection of African American Art

Claude Clark trained and taught in the United States, as well as Puerto Rico, the Virgin Islands, Jamaica, and West Africa. In 1950, he lived with Puerto Rican field workers; and during that year, a sudden storm pummeled the lush and vivid landscape. The laborers fled from the fields with the same speed and intensity

as the emerging storm. Seeking shelter from the downpour, they carried giant banana leaves over their heads that covered their entire bodies.

A sense of urgency and rapid motion induced by the pressing storm are the focus of Clark's **Rain**. Textures created by the application of thick color accentuate the alacrity and flurry of activity invoked in this scene. The black outline delineating the figures draws attention to the action, and the blurry background offers only a hint of the terrain. The artist's use of a few bold colors further underscores the movement of the figures, and yet their faces are barely distinguishable.

There are several themes represented in this image that Clark commonly utilized: the work of the common laborer, the relationship between humans and the environment, and the idea of nature as a refuge offering protection. However, this piece also demonstrates that nature can also be an all-powerful adversary with destructive potential.

Like other images of landscapes, **Rain** suggests the idea of the sublime in nature. Employing banana leaves as shelter, these field workers are simultaneously protected by, yet seek shelter from nature's omnipotence. Clark uses this duality to provoke a consideration of nature's abilities.

Caitlin Ament '09
Art History



Ernest T. Crichlow (1914–2005)

Lovers, 1938

lithograph

14 x 11 1/2 inches

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Collection of African American Art

Ernest T. Crichlow's curiously titled lithograph, **Lovers**, is a depiction of an unusual topic that is both impressionistic and visually distorted. In this violent scene, a young black woman's left arm is being held by the hooded member of the Ku Klux Klan as he appears to pull her dress up. There is clearly a sense of struggle

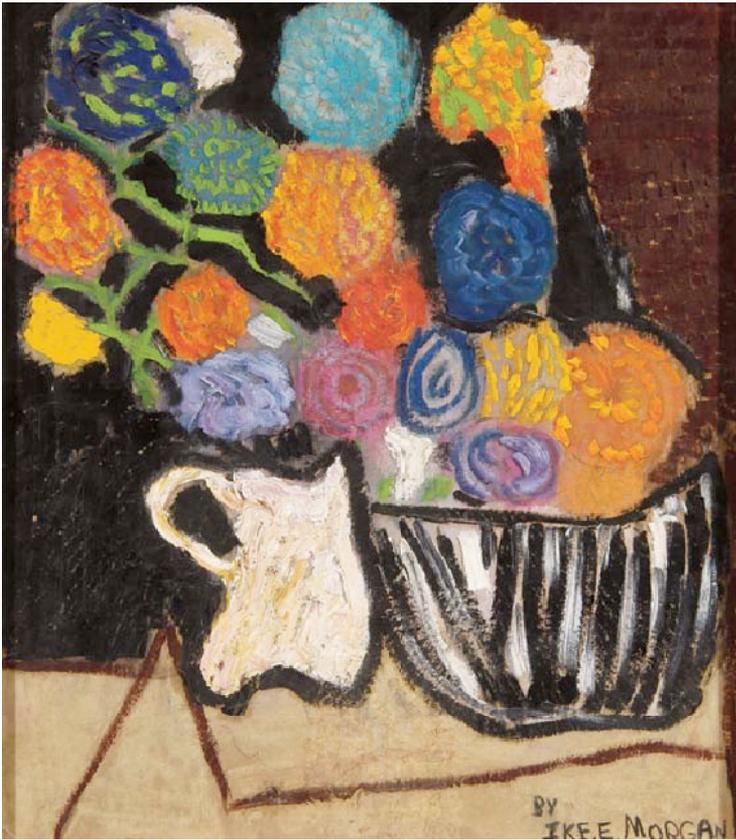
shown by the awkward body language of the two, as their bodies are twisted and locked together with limbs flailing.

Created in 1938, this work is an example of how the seeds for the civil rights movement were sown. Crichtlow utilizes only black and white in this lithograph, and the scene seems to be almost shrouded in shadows. Without a doubt, Crichtlow is creating a dark look into a horrible event as the scene is set in a bedroom creating an intimate setting. It appears as if the figure in the Ku Klux Klan outfit has forced his way into the woman's room, because there is broken furniture on the ground to the left.

Yet the puzzling part of this work of art is in the victim's facial expression. It is not an expression of pain or anguish. It seems more like an expression of resignation. It's as if Crichtlow wanted to suggest that there was little that this woman could do about the situation, and she has given up trying to fight it. However, on second glance, the face also has a distinct hint of determined anger as the eyebrows are raised and her gaze is on the hidden face of the coward beneath the cloak.

Lovers is both a politically charged and powerful piece as it tackles the issues of southern violence committed by whites upon blacks in the post civil war era. In 1938, this topic was considered controversial because of what it exposed. In the end, it is a bold piece, which utilizes different artistic techniques to bring life into Crichtlow's contentious creation.

Garrett Dennett '09
History



Ike E. Morgan (b. 1958)

Still Life, 1990

pastel and acrylic on paper

27 1/2 x 22 inches

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Having been institutionalized for chronic schizophrenia at the Austin State Hospital for over 20 years, Ike E. Morgan may not be at the top of any list of famous African American artists, but the inherent primitive and free nature of his work calls for a closer analysis and reconsideration of the term "fine art." This self-taught painter's isolation from the world while institutionalized has given his art a language that is truly unique.

Working with both pastel and acrylic paint, Morgan creates a vibrant depiction of a seemingly simple scene in **Still Life**. The distorted image of a white pitcher and a bowl of flowers float uncomfortably on an indeterminate surface which looks unfinished due to its lack of color, while an unnaturally black background allows outline and pure pigment to simultaneously merge and compete with one another. The idea of realism has been infused with a personal language, particularly in regard to the colors of the flowers. Although not really true to life, the vibrations that are set up between the colors speak volumes.

However misrepresented reality seems to be with the encrusted layers of paint and pastel, painterly strokes, and distorted lines, the image fails to cause the viewer any sense of discomfort or uncertainty. Instead, it provides a whimsical view of an ordinary subject, and poses the question, "Why not see, or at least think, this way?"

Jordan Tobin '08
Art History



William E. Smith (b. 1913)

The Lamp Post, 1938

linoleum cut

9 1/2 x 6 inches

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There is a strong sense of loneliness and depression in William E. Smith's linoleum cut print, **The Lamp Post**. Smith used the graphic nature of the linoleum cut technique to its best advantage here, in order to achieve a powerful image with an overbearing sense of darkness while maintaining a presence of hope. Created in 1938, Smith's print captures the African American experience following the Great Depression.

William E. Smith was a very prolific printmaker, and many of his prints were produced using linoleum cut. For an image such as this one, Smith would take a thin sheet of linoleum and cut a design into it. Ink would then be applied to the surface of the sheet; and after running the plate and paper through a press, the cut lines would appear as the design. Using this deceptively simple method, Smith produced heartfelt, high contrast images.

Leaning upon the lamppost, the figure in this print faces an imposing darkness. He stands alone, and his only support comes from the sole source of light—the lamp. This suggests that even in the face of such oppression and impoverishment, the figure will persevere through trying times. By portraying the figure and the lamppost in white against such a dark ground, Smith reveals the protagonist's will to continue forward in his struggle for equality and serenity. **The Lamp Post** successfully captures the endurance of an African American enduring the overwhelming experience of the Great Depression.

Jose Esparra '08
Studio Art