A History of the Art Museum

As the president of the nation’s first black, state-supported, liberal arts college, James E. Shepard was aware of the cultural and humanistic dimension that fine arts could bring to the North Carolina College for Negroes. He envisioned the tangible legacy that a museum could bestow by collecting, preserving, and exhibiting objects of African American cultural importance. However, in the 1920s and 30s, priority had to be given to far more pressing matters than building a museum, such as developing strategies to ensure the survival of the school. It was unrealistic, if not unfathomable, to concentrate efforts on the arts although, the original character of the institution supported that focus.

The creation of a museum for North Carolina Central University had been a goal of several members of the art department faculty since the beginning of the department. When Dr. Shepard hired Ms. Marion C. Parham in 1942, a step toward the establishment of a museum was taken. Although teaching was her primary responsibility, Ms. Parham recognized the importance of a museum and exhibition space. With meager resources, she secured exhibitions from the American Federation of Arts almost from the beginning of her tenure and successfully mounted the first student exhibition in 1954 in Room 206 of the Music and Fine Arts Building.

By all accounts, the next department chairman Mr. Edward Wilson was an aggressive, determined advocate for a permanent exhibition space. Prior to the fiftieth anniversary celebration of the University in 1960, Mr. Wilson was unequivocal in his support of an exhibition space. In his proposal for an art exhibit to be mounted during the celebration period he stated:

I must go on record as voicing an objection to attempting a major exhibit on campus, without the proper facilities for showing works of art. As you know, the football team plays on a football field with seats for spectators and with physicians; the Thespians perform on a lighted stage; the students eat in a dining hall, and even lavatories exist for personal needs, etc. I wish only that we would be granted the opportunity to exhibit art in a gallery.

Mr. Wilson would not be successful in garnering support for a museum, but he sounded the clarion call.

Mr. Wilson met and was greatly encouraged by William Zorach, a leading American sculptor, who had come to North Carolina Central University to complete the memorial, commissioned statue of the founder of the University, Dr. James E. Shepard. Today the 7.5 foot figure greets all visitors to the University in its central placement at the entrance to the University in front of the Hoey Administration Building.

By 1958 an exhibition space was set aside in one room of the Fine Arts Building and served as the principal place for showing art work until after Mr. Wilson left North Carolina Central University in 1964. Ms. Lynn Igoe became the director of the North Carolina Central University Art Museum in 1971, and the first University gallery was formed in a renovated space in the old cafeteria the next year.

Ms. Igoe’s successor, Mrs. Nancy C. Gillespie, continued the advocacy for a permanent exhibition space. Gillespie urged the building of a new Fine Arts Center and outlined detailed plans for space utilization, including a smaller gallery for the exhibition of permanent acquisitions adjoining a gallery for temporary exhibitions. The forty-seven original works in the collection at the time were the beginning of what would become a premier collection of African-American art.

In January of 1976, Mr. Norman Pendergraft became director of the North Carolina Central University Art Museum and successfully initiated a comprehensive plan to further advance the museum. Under his watch a strong board of directors was developed and museum acquisitions significantly increased. Mr. Pendergraft developed a collecting policy which focused on art by or about African Americans, and he scrupulously acquired works with a discerning eye. By the late 1970s the museum had a solid foundation and existed as an important teaching and stimulating cultural institution within the University. Pendergraft had built a collection that included more than two hundred works of emerging and established African-American artists and works by others focusing on the African-American experience.

On November 4, 1977, the University broke ground for a new art museum in its current location across from the C. Ruth Edwards Music Building. In 1986 Irwin Belk made a donation of $59,500 to establish an endowment; the earnings have been used for acquisitions and restorations of works of art. To honor the Belk family, the gallery housing the museum’s permanent collection is named the Carol Grotnes Belk Gallery.

Mr. Kenneth G. Rodgers replaced Mr. Norman Pendergraft as director in 1996. Under his leadership significant exhibitions of regional and national significance were mounted and the collection was expanded with the addition of multiple works by A. B. Jackson and Felrath Hines. Notable exhibitions with accompanying catalogs were developed on Malvin Gray Johnson,
Elizabeth Catlett, Charles White, Allan Freelon, Minnie Evans, acclaimed photojournalist Alexander Rivera, and others. The exhibition catalog *Climbing up the Mountain: The modern Art of Malvin Gray Johnson* received the North Carolina Museums’ Council Best Catalogue for 2002 Award.

The director was on the planning team for the nationally touring exhibition *To Conserve a Legacy: American Art from Historically Black Colleges and Universities*. The director also wrote essays on Jacob Lawrence, Elizabeth Catlett, and Robert Scott Duncanson for the exhibition catalog published by MIT Press. The project was co-organized by the Addison Gallery of American Art and the Studio Museum in Harlem in association with the Williamstown Art Conservation Center. *To Conserve a Legacy* was conceived as a cooperative venture to locate, research, conserve and exhibit works from six participating HBCUs. The touring exhibition was jointly shown at North Carolina Central University, Duke University Museum of Art, and the Center for Documentary Studies in the Fall of 2000.

The collection contains works by three major nineteenth-century artists – Robert S. Duncanson, Edward M. Bannister, and Henry O. Tanner. The twentieth century is represented by a generous number of artists active during the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and the WPA period of the 1930s, including Richmond Barthe, Romare Bearden, Robert Blackburn, Selma Burke, Elizabeth Catlett, Aaron Douglas, William H. Johnson, Jacob Lawrence, Norman Lewis, Charles White, and Hale Woodruff. Contemporary artists include John Biggers, Sam Gilliam, Barkley Hendricks, and Kerry James Marshall, among others.

As we look to the future, it is the commitment of the North Carolina Central University Art Museum to be one of the nation’s best and most dynamic African-American art institutions. It will continue to be recognized locally as a vital and energetic cultural gathering place and an indispensable educational resource for the university and community. Strategic planning will be invaluable to our vision and planning. The Board of Directors has recognized the Museum’s pressing need for expansion and is seeking university approval for a new facility.

The North Carolina Central University Art Museum recognizes and welcomes the opportunity to promote its collection, exhibitions, and programs. It will continue to affirm the importance of African American art and artists by maintaining a regular schedule of exhibitions from the collection and outside sources. This will be complemented by sustaining its acquisitions program that emphasizes emerging and established artists. Innovative educational initiatives involving the collection and temporary exhibitions will reinforce the Museum’s position as an important learning resource and underscore its university role as vital and stimulating.

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Sources: Art Museum Records
April 2009