

# Tradition and Conflict: Images of a Turbulent Decade, 1963-1973

## The Studio Museum in Harlem New York, NY, 1985

Wendell Walker's first Museum staff position was in 1985 at The Studio Museum in Harlem, where he served as Exhibition Designer and Preparator. The position included care of the Museum's collection, as well as management of the New York State Harlem Art Collection and gallery space, which was housed at the Adam Clayton Power Jr. State Office Building directly across the street from the Museum.

When Walker joined the staff, they had already started working on the Museum's most ambitious exhibition at that time, *Tradition and Conflict: Images of a Turbulent Decade, 1963-1973*. The exhibition was very successful for the Museum, and opened many new chapters for Walker.

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*This was an era of rapid growth for me professionally. Being part of the Museum's Accreditation process with AAM was a very valuable experience. Then there was the installation of Richard Yarde's Savoy Ballroom that I managed in Paris, working with the artist, as part of the centennial celebration of the Statue of Liberty. The artist-in-residence program and exhibitions I designed and installed were some of my best experiences of those years, though, and I believe formed the basic principles of my approach to exhibitoin design. Best of all, many life-long friendships came out of my years at SMH. (WW)*

You can learn more about the exhibition at these links:

[New York Times](#) — Art: Studio Museum in Black Art of the 60s

[Studio Museum in Harlem Studio Store](#) — *Tradition and Conflict* publication



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### The 'Vasari' Diary

TELLING IT LIKE IT WAS

THE STUDIO Museum in Harlem has launched the most ambitious project of its 17-year history. *Tradition and Conflict: Images of a Turbulent Decade, 1963-1973* is the first attempt to deal in depth with art that was created in direct response to the unprecedented chain of events that gave rise to the civil-rights and black power movements, the protests against the war in Vietnam, the end of Jim Crow laws, the election of blacks to major political offices, the women's movement and the creation of major black cultural institutions such as the Studio Museum itself.

The exhibition, curated by the museum's executive director, Mary Schmidt Campbell, consists of 150 objects by 55 painters, printmakers, sculptors and photographers and will run through June 30. Concurrently, the museum, in cooperation with the City College of New York, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the New Museum and the 92nd St. YMHA, is offering lectures, seminars, symposia, concerts, children's programs, art workshops, film screenings and poetry readings, with such well-known guests as writer Tompkins and politician Julian Bond.

According to Campbell, the idea for a show came from artist Benny Andrews. "He came to me about five years ago," she recalls, "and said we must get together a show on the art of the '60s." A year later, she created a national advisory council of humanities scholars who were consulted on the organization of the exhibition, invited to write catalogue essays or asked to participate in symposia and seminars.

"The premise was to try to choose artists who have remained strong and vital and to try to pick their strongest works." But Campbell wanted to give a comprehensive presentation, and "the show was deferred several times due to lack of funds." Eventually she was able to gather an extraordinary amount of support. The New York State Council on the Arts helped inaugurate the project with a planning grant. Later large grants totaling almost \$200,000 were obtained from the Ford Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts and the Humanities and the New York State Council for the Humanities to support the installation, catalogue and public programs.

Campbell says the exhibition starts in 1963 because that was the year of the March on Washington, when more than 250,000 Americans of all races and backgrounds mobilized to demonstrate for civil rights. She also notes that, "in terms of visual imagery, the artists did not respond until

about 1965." That was the year Romare Bearden and Norman Lewis founded Spiral, a group of black artists interested in the concept of negritude—"a pride in African culture and the unity of all African people." As Campbell describes it, Spiral was "politically conservative group with no set ideology," and the members never did agree on a politically oriented theme exhibition. When Bearden suggested that the group make a collective collage, they showed no interest, but he himself began to experiment with collage for the first time.

The current exhibition includes *Conjur Woman* (1964), created from pieces of photographic enlargements, in which a powerful masklike face links the magic healer to her roots in her African past.

During this period, African imagery and techniques—long a source of inspiration for modern painters and sculptors—took on a special meaning for many black artists. For example, Hale Woodruff (1900-80) is represented by *Ancestral Memory* (1966), a handsome painterly abstraction built around a masklike form. Lois Mailou Jones, who in 1973 was the first Afro-American to have a one-person show at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, used mask-like stylized facial silhouettes and elements of textile design for decorative, elegant works such as *Moore Mopier* (1971). Sam Gilliam, inspired by the Washington color-field painters as well as by African art, used a technique akin to that of African tie-dyeing for a 114-by-21-inch stained canvas

memorial to Martin Luther King Jr. At the same time, other artists began to attack the stereotypes that permeated American visual culture. For example, Joe Overstreet, Betye Saar, Jeff Donaldson and Morry De Villars all did satirical works depicting the revolt of Aunt Jemima. (It was only recently that the Quaker Oats Company changed the image of this trademark, transforming her into a slim young woman with a modern scarf across her hair.)

The title "Tradition and Conflict" was chosen with care. Although the '60s and early '70s have been viewed mainly as a time of social upheaval, Campbell points out that the ideals of freedom and equality are part of the American tradition, and that "the art and the period itself were an attempt to reconcile the two. It was an attempt to be 100 percent American." This is particularly evident in the first part of the show, "Freedom and Justice for All: Images of the American Flag," where the flag is used ironically in relation to images of injustice. *Wanted Poster Series #17* (1971), in tones of brown, by Charles White (1918-79), shows a slave and her child against a backdrop of American eagle and flag, while Faith Ringgold shows people—blacks and whites alike—imprisoned behind the bars of a breeding flag.

Malcolm Bailey's evocative conceptual work *Hold Separate But Equal* (1969), lent by the Museum of Modern Art, shows diagrams of a technique akin to that of African tie-dyeing for a 114-by-21-inch stained canvas

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blacks on the left and whites on the right—as if this had indeed been the case—and Lewis as to ponder our assumptions about equality of opportunity. Jacob Lawrence turned his attention to contemporary events in *The Rebel* (1963), a confrontation between blacks and the police. Dana Chandler's *Fred Hampton's Door*, a construction by the Chicago police as he lies, is an angry work of protest, while a modest, sensitive collage by Howardena Pindell was done to express the artist's grief at the tragedy of King's death. Other celebrations of black heroes include Raymond Saunders' ironic "Jack Johnson" series, Benny Andrews' striking oil and collage *The Champions* (1968), Barbara Chase-Riboud's abstract bronze-and-wood *Monument to Malcolm X* (1969) and Gordon Parks' arresting photographic portrait of Malcolm X, Stokely Carmichael and Muhammad Ali.

One section of the show is devoted to photographs selected by Roland Freeman, himself a working photographer. The black photographers were witnesses to a special part of American history, events such as the march from Selma to Montgomery, or the presence of members of the Poor People's Campaign at the 1968 Republican National Convention in Miami, recorded by Robert Sengstacke. Roy Lewis photographed young rioters bursting out of a store window in Chicago during the rioting that followed the assassination of King. In a Pulitzer Prize-winning photo, Moneta Sleet Jr. captured the profound sorrow of Coretta King as she sat through her husband's funeral with her daughter's head cradled against her hip. Sleet recalls that Mrs. King insisted that someone from Johnson Publishing Company (which publishes *Ebony* and *Jet* magazines) be part of the pool of photographers to go inside the church. Thus, for him, this was "a routine not so routine assignment."

At the opening of the exhibition, Andrews remarked that he "can remember museum officials never believing that there were black people capable of putting on a show of this caliber." As a founder and co-chairman of the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition, he became a veteran of picket lines and negotiations with the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Museum of Modern Art and the Metropolitan Museum. He recalls that "until recently there were very few black people in museum galleries." Although some museum officials were willing to accept the idea, very few black artists were actually shown in these institutions, and blacks were largely excluded from the curatorial and critical

fields. Thus the fact that the Studio Museum is run by "a very good professional staff," some of whom Andrews called on for advice when he served as director of the Visual Arts Program of NEA, and most of whom are black, is one of the most significant aspects of this show.

Campbell, the curator, is an art historian with eight years of experience in an art administration. Under her direction the Studio Museum has produced award-winning catalogues and moved into its new facility, a five-story building transformed by architect John James into an elegant space that features a high-ceilinged central gallery surrounded by smaller rooms on the ground and mezzanine levels. She points with pride to an internship program, supported by grants from the National Endowment for the Arts and the New York State Council on the Arts, in which students with a strong background in art history are given rigorous training in all aspects of museum administration. Unfortunately, opportunities for blacks in arts administration still seem to be limited, and Campbell admits to being frustrated when it comes to advising her interns what to do next.

Although the leadership is black, the staff of the museum is now integrated, and whites have not been excluded from the current exhibition. Crisis Lyley Lippard invited to select a group of artists, both black and white, whose work reflects political activism, especially in the anti-war and feminist movements, both of which took many tactics from the civil-rights movement. Her choices include pieces from Melvin Edwards' "Lynch Fragment Series" (1963-65), made of welded-together spikes, chains, knife sheaths, nuts, bolts and hoses; May Stevens' mixed-media *Letter to Angela*; Big Daddy and George Jackson (1972); and Rudolf Baranicki's *Nagade Elogy* (1969-73), a large oil painting based on a G.I.'s snapshot of a child's head charred white by napalm.

Beautifully designed by Joseph R. Sanders and Wendell Walker, the exhibition also includes a slide presentation of outdoor murals, a video montage of major news events of 1963-73 and an audio presentation of speeches and songs. The catalogue has an introduction by Lerone Bennett Jr., the noted black scholar and writer who is a senior editor of *Ebony*. The historian Vincent Harding has contributed an essay on the major developments of the period, and there are essays by Campbell and Lippard as well as excerpts from Andrews' journals of the activities of the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition from 1960 to 1973.

The exhibition, inspired by about one-third, will travel under the auspices of Independent Curators Incorporated, a

nonprofit traveling exhibition service, and will thus be seen by a wide audience. As Andrews says, "Five or ten years ago this show would have been seen as a token thing for a certain group of people. Now there is recognition that this was part of other things that were going on in the country."

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### TRADITION AND CONFLICT IMAGES OF A TURBULENT DECADE, 1963-1973

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