

28 Greats

A Celebration of African-American Art and Artists



Thelma Johnson Street

Artist, dancer, designer, and educator **Thelma Johnson Street** (1912-1959, left) was a daring woman of tireless energy whose remarkable career brought her international attention. Aside from being the first African-American woman to have her work purchased by MoMA for its permanent collection (by the museum's first director, Alfred H. Barr, no less), Street was also championed by fellow artists and noted art collectors. Largely forgotten since her death in 1959, Street received renewed interest in 2016 when one of her studies for a mural painting (below, left) was installed at the African-American Museum of History and Culture in Washington, D.C.



Thelma Johnson Street, *Rabbit Man*, 1941. Gouache on board, 6 5/8 x 4 7/8 inches. Museum of Modern Art, NY.

Born Thelma Johnson in Yakima, Washington, she was raised in Portland, Oregon. While finding some early success there, her career truly developed in San Francisco, where she exhibited regularly after her arrival in 1938. She soon had the good fortune of working with famed Mexican muralist Diego Rivera on *Pan-American Unity*, a colossal mural for the Golden Gate International Exposition (1939). While having a number of assistants, Rivera later singled out Street and her work in the press, calling it "one of the most interesting manifestations in this country. It is extremely evolved, and sophisticated enough to reconquer the grace and purity of African and American art. It is not an imitation not has it been directly influenced by these. It is only the deep and personal expression of the painter's feeling." MoMA would purchase her gouache painting *Rabbit Man* (above right) in 1942. Celebrity collectors of her work included dancer Katherine Dunham, Vincent Price, and Paulette Goddard (who met the artist while she was a model for one of the figures in the Rivera mural).

Working for the Works Progress Administration (WPA), Street conceived a number of public murals, including a project called *Death of a Black Sailor*. The preliminary painting, exhibited in 1943 in a Los Angeles gallery, depicted the poor treatment of African-American servicemen upon their return from war, including discrimination faced from employers, refusal of donations to blood banks, and segregated barracks and restaurants. Street received at least two threatening letters from the Ku Klux Klan ordering her to remove the painting or face the consequences. Both she and the gallery refused to be intimidated and the painting remained in place throughout the exhibition. In response she began a series of murals focusing on the achievements of African-Americans, including *Medicine and Transportation* (below, left), as a means of better educating young Americans about diversity. "You can't do very much with old folks," she said, "you have to let them grow up with the idea."



Thelma Johnson Street, *Medicine and Transportation*, circa 1940-44. Tempera and oil on board.

Her talents were not limited to painting, however; in 1947 the fashion company *Koret of California* commissioned her to design fabrics for their collection. But it was her other passion, interpretive dance, that brought her artistry to thousands in her many performances around the globe (right). Like her visual art, Street's choreography incorporated an array of well-researched global influences. In still another endeavor she created, with her second husband and manager, John Edgar Kline, what they called "Children's Cities" in British Columbia and Honolulu. These art and cultural centers were designed to combat prejudice through multicultural education.



Thelma Johnson Street during a dance performance.