

Recent Acquisitions and Notables from the Permanent Collection

The Studio Museum in Harlem

New York, NY, 1985

Recent Acquisitions and Notables from the Permanent Collection at the Studio Museum in Harlem was curated by Dierdre Bibby, who was curator of the Museum’s collection at that time. Walker had joined the Museum’s staff as Exhibitoin Designer and Preparator the year before, and this project was Walker’s first major undertaking with Bibby as curator. It presented several challenges with the size and requirements of some of the works, and the solutions Walker devised on a tight budget were very successful.

The Studio Museum was my introduction to the Museum world, and Terrie Rouse was my boss and leader, but Diedre Bibby also played a very important role in that process. I remember her being very suspicious of me in my early days at the Museum. I had to prove myself to her, and it wasn’t an easy process. In many ways, Recent Acquisitions and Notables was the project that brought us together... and I think the success of the exhibition was partly the result of that bonding.

Dierdre very much wanted each work to have it’s own space. This was a challenge due to the relative open design of the Museum’s galleries. We worked closely together reviewing each work, what would be the best way to group--or not, and how to provide the space required for Benny Andrews Trash, which was something like 30 feet long. I had a similar challenge with where to put Houston Conwill’s Seven Storey Mountain. It also required a lot of physical and visual space. The main part of the gallery was obviously required, and I was able to come up with an arrangement that worked beautifully, with particians to create environments for other works.

Another unique challenge was Adebisi Akanji’s cemen sculpture—which was almost like a wall fragment. I decided to make the wall the frame, allowing it to be seen from both sides, and enabling very effective lighting that highlighted the details in the cement textured surface.

Of course, I always loved the Museum’s collection of traditional African Art, which was my original field of study, and my original reason for coming to New York. This installation of that part of the collection was just a warmup to some installations that followed. (WW)



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Art: On Display at the Studio Museum in Harlem

By JOHN RUSSELL

FIRST mooted 20 years ago by the Junior Council of the Museum of Modern Art, and initially intended as a work space for artists, the Studio Museum in Harlem, at 144 West 125th Street, is a model to all other institutions in its feeling for reason and proportion. It does not aim to be 12 stories high, let alone to take over 125th Street as far as the eye can see. It does not have splashy temporary exhibitions that turn out to be a lot of fuss about nothing much. It does what it is there to do, quietly and effectively, and it has a completely professional staff that knows how to show works of art to their best advantage. There isn't a prima donna in the bunch, either.

The museum also makes the best possible use of an interior space that turns out, when analyzed, to be the kind of duplex that we would all like to live in if we could afford it. Its fall show, which has just opened and was curated by Deirdre Bibby, falls into separate but related parts. Upstairs, there are selections from the work of four collectors who specialize in the kinds of art in which the museum specializes.

Downstairs, it has a mix of recent acquisitions with old and tried favorites from the permanent collection. (It should be added that the Municipal Art Society of New York gave the museum an award not long ago for having built, in no time at all, "the foremost collection of black art in America.")

The patriarch of the entire display is undoubtedly Henry Ossawa Tanner (1859-1937). Tanner is the archetype of the black artist who was made welcome by his white colleagues, both here and in Europe. Born into the family of a bishop in the African Methodist Episcopal Church in Pittsburgh, Tanner enrolled in 1880 in the Philadelphia Academy of Fine Arts, where an instinct for high quality led him to study for two years with Thomas Eakins.

Eakins saw the potential of his student. The two came to know each other well, and the friendship lasted. (Eakins painted Tanner's portrait in 1902.) Quite clearly, Tanner had a way of getting through to people, both in his art and as a man, and after some years in Atlanta as a teacher-cum-photographer, he found patrons who were ready to send him to Europe and see what came of it.



Adebisi Akanji's cement screen work "A Hunting Scene," on view at the Studio Museum in Harlem.

Rome was initially the object of his ambitions, but once he had had a taste of Paris he had the good sense to stay there. His teachers — Jean-Paul Laurens and Benjamin Constant — were not in the class of Eakins, but as far as Parisian preferment was concerned they were on the inside track. Tanner was in Brittany in 1893, when Brittany ranked high among centers of progressive art, and shortly after that he began to exhibit with considerable success in the Paris Salons. The French Government bought his "Raising of Lazarus" (1897), and both the Philadelphia Museum and the Los Angeles County Museum purchased paintings by him of religious subjects.

Tanner had, in fact, a public and official success of a kind that caused him in 1909 to become the first black artist to be elected a member of the National Academy of Design in New York. Patrons were happy to help him go to this place and that — not last, to the Holy Land — but he lived primarily in Paris, of which he had had by the end of his life an experience that dated back almost 50 years.

It was a remarkable career. We do not see Tanner's worked-up Salon pictures every day, or even every other day, but on the evidence presented at the Studio Museum his smaller and more private undertakings can rank

with Albert Pinkham Ryder at his best. (Morton Simpson, the collector responsible for the loans in question, is to be congratulated on having got hold of so many of them).

Readers who want to know what these little Taners look like should think first of the visionary intensity (on a very small scale) of Ryder. Next, they should mate that quality with the rich crust of Georges Rouault's small early paintings. Then they will not be too far from the reality of these subdued but ardent visions. In his religious paintings at the Studio Museum, Tanner does not particularize. We never see a face, and the detail of the action is never spelled out. But all nature bears witness to what is going on, and the angelic vagueness of the human figures never seems merely approximate. This is the New Testament veiled in a soft, all-enveloping light, but none the less poignant for that.

There is also a straightforward little landscape painted near Aix-en-Provence that is in sharp contrast to most of the paintings of that area. Almost without exception, painters step on the gas when they get to Provence. Color goes way up. Light sears the eyeballs. All nature gets into espadrilles.

Tanner's reaction is quite different. He does not fail to note the copper-colored earth and the chunky little architecture of the archetypal Provençal house. But he takes a relaxed, gently modulated view of the scene, as if he had long before undergone his initiation into southern sunlight and did not need to force the note.

After Tanner, it is Romare Bearden who comes on as the old master of the present installation. Much has been said, here and elsewhere, about the flickering fancy — quick as a lizard's tongue — that Bearden brings to his collages. With an apparent lack of effort that masks a long and dedicated apprenticeship, he can conjure up a particular place, a given human situation, and a whole regiment of henchmen in the animal and insect worlds.

Among the Beardens that are on view at the Studio Museum, "Eve With Butterflies" of 1971 and "Quiet Evening, Mecklenberg, N.C." of 1967 are particularly good examples. The work looks fleet, vivacious and lightly ballasted, but Bearden loads every square inch with meaning. No one

else has quite his combination of deep feeling and light touch, but James Denmark's "Beach Party" of 1967 uses cutout figures and ready-made materials to euphoric effect.

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It is fundamental to the purpose of the Studio Museum that it should include fine examples of what is mis-called "primitive" art — and show them, what is more, in the context of the African diaspora, rather than of the undifferentiated greed of certain collectors. Among the exhibits that have their natural dignity restored to them in the present installation is a formidable dance mask made by the Baga people in what was formerly French Guinea. Its enormous impact is owed in part to its great height (almost 50 inches) and its hieratic mingling of human and crocodile forms with tightly curling horns. But much is owed also to the mix of paint and camwood powder that gives it such a complex chromatic presence — one in which black answers to yellow and brown to a faded orange.

To produce quite such an overwhelming impact in the context of mainline painting and sculpture is not easy, though Benny Andrews gives it his best shot in a huge painting about the mistreatment of blacks by whites that stretches across a whole wall in the street-level gallery. He also turns in a telling symbolic image in "Trees of Life," a painting that contrasts a paradisaical landscape, all fruit and flowers, with an unaccountable deep black hole in the middle of it. In that same context, mention should be made of "Cannibal Rain" by Emilio Cruz, in which elegance of color and delicacy of execution contrast with overtones of a world in torment.

Among works in which African associations mingle with echoes from European and American sources, two stand out. One is "Kano House (maquette)" (1979) by George Smith. This looks like, and potentially could be, a traditional African house. It also looks like a sculpture by Tony Smith that had been amended for human habitation. To get the two ideas to work together without incongruity was a neat trick, but we can truly imagine this house in an African setting, just as we can sense the light and shade of Africa when we look at the cement screen called "A Hunting Scene" by the Nigerian sculptor Adebisi Akanji.

The other piece is "Sister-Ship" (1983) by an artist who is known simply as Catti. This has elements of an African mask, in the strong vertical thrust, the profusion of straw and the use of pieces of mirror. But it also has overtones of Art Deco decoration, plus some fragments of antiwar phraseology that are very much of our own day. The three disparate elements ought to fall apart like an unshaken cocktail, but they don't.

The Studio Museum is open from 10 A.M. to 5 P.M. on Wednesday, Thursday and Friday, and from 1 to 6 P.M. on Saturday and Sunday.