

COLLECTION HIGHLIGHTS



Smithsonian
Institution

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ARCHIVES OF AMERICAN ART RECEIVES GRANT FROM THE WALTON FAMILY FOUNDATION TO SUPPORT DIGITIZATION OF COLLECTIONS

The Archives of American Art (“AAA”) has received a three-year grant of up to \$900,000 from the Walton Family Foundation to support the ongoing digitization of the Archives’ collections. AAA is obliged to match the grant that will be given in three annual installments of up to \$300,000 each. The support will enable the AAA to double its current rate of collections digitization in stages from 50 linear feet to 100 linear feet per year; and will result in at least 240 additional linear feet of archival material to be available online by September 2019.

AAA holds nearly 6,000 collections of archival material on the artists, collectors, dealers, and scholars who have shaped the history of art in America. Its oral-history program, containing interviews with important artists ranging from Charles Burchfield to Kehinde Wiley, preserves the voices and personal stories of nearly 2,300 art-world luminaries recorded since 1958. Transcripts for many of these are available on the AAA website.

“The Archives, with more than 20 million items in our ever-expanding collections, is the world’s largest and most widely used resource dedicated to collecting and preserving the papers and primary records of the visual arts in America,” said Secretary David Skorton. “This generous grant from the Walton Family Foundation will help us provide more material available online at a faster pace. On behalf of the Archives and the growing number of people around the globe who explore our singular collections online, we are deeply grateful for the foundation’s support.”

Since the inception of its digitization program in 2004, and with support from the Terra Foundation for American Art, AAA has created nearly 2.5 million digital images that represent full online access to more than 160 of its most important collections. The collections include the papers of art world luminaries, such as Milton Avery, Joseph Cornell, Lee Krasner, Horace Pippin, Jackson Pollock, and Grant Wood, among many others. As the program has grown, visitation to AAA has increased from about 2,000 users a year, via its reading rooms and interlibrary loan program for its microfilm, to more than 500,000 users a year, with the vast majority visiting online.

“The task of digitizing the Archives’ vast collections for broad accessibility requires a dedicated team of experts and time,” said Kate Haw, director of the Archives of American Art. “This challenge grant from the distinguished Walton Family Foundation allows us to expand both our technical and staff capacities to ramp up our pace beyond what we could have imagined. We look forward to getting underway to achieve our ultimate goal of making our collections available to anyone, anytime, anywhere and stimulating understanding and appreciation of American art worldwide.”

HIRSHHORN MUSEUM AND SCULPTURE GARDEN ANNOUNCES NEW PARTNERSHIP WITH US DEPARTMENT OF STATE'S OFFICE OF ART IN EMBASSIES

The Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden (“HMSG”) announced a new, long-term partnership with the US Department of State’s Office of Art in Embassies, a global program that fosters public diplomacy through the visual arts. The collaboration will allow both institutions to develop international exhibitions, extended collection loans, artist residencies, and programming. It will kick off on January 11, 2017, at 6:30 p.m. in HMSG’s Ring Auditorium, with a public discussion and reception featuring renowned contemporary artists Nick Cave, Imran Qureshi, and Pat Steir.

“Throughout the past 50 years, Art in Embassies has played a critical role in encouraging international cultural exchange, creating lasting connections through a shared passion in the visual arts,” said Hirshhorn Director Melissa Chiu. “As a public institution with a global audience, we are excited by the opportunity to join forces as we advance our mission of showcasing renowned contemporary artists who explore the most significant political and cultural issues of our time.”

The day after the discussion, the US Department of State will recognize artists Nick Cave, Jenny Holzer, Wolf Kahn, Qureshi, Steir, and Rachel Whiteread with the International Medal of Arts during a biennial awards ceremony.

“Through culture, we can introduce ideas, and each of these artists has contributed to the artistic landscape of our nation in significant ways,” said Virginia Shore, Art in Embassies’ acting director and chief curator. “Their artwork evokes our universal aspirations as human beings and highlights our shared experiences with people of other lands, backgrounds and faiths.” Future partnership initiatives will be announced in spring 2017.

NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AFRICAN AMERICAN HISTORY AND CULTURE RECEIVES HISTORIC FREEDMEN’S BUREAU DATABASE

The National Museum of African American History and Culture (“NMAAHC”) received the newly indexed database of the historic Freedmen’s Bureau Records on December 6, 2016, from FamilySearch, the world’s largest genealogy organization. The database contains genealogical information of African Americans and refugees freed after the Civil War.

D. Todd Christofferson, an elder of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, presented the database to the museum before an audience of congressional leaders, genealogy experts, and volunteers who were key to the project’s success.

“Using modern, digital and web-based technology and the power of volunteers, this project is unlocking information from a transformative era in the history of African American families and the American nation,” said Hollis Gentry, a genealogical specialist at the museum. “Making that information available globally via the web will allow all of us to enlarge our understanding of the past.”

“I can think of no better way to honor the unprecedented commitment of over 25,000 volunteers who helped uncover the names of 1.8 million newly freed slaves, than to have their work symbolically housed at the National Museum of African American History and Culture,” said Christofferson. “Countless African Americans can now trace their family history and shine the light on their courageous ancestors.”

The Freedmen’s Bureau, organized under an 1865 Congressional order at the conclusion of the Civil War, offered assistance to freed slaves in many ways. Handwritten records of these transactions include records such as marriage registers, hospital or patient registers, educational efforts, census lists, labor contracts and indenture or apprenticeship papers, among others. The records were compiled in 15 states and the District of Columbia.

Using the index and document scans provided by FamilySearch, the museum has begun a collaboration with the Smithsonian’s Transcription Center. The Transcription Center is an online platform for volunteers to digitally transcribe and review transcriptions of Smithsonian collections. With almost two million individual records, the Freedmen’s Bureau Transcription Project will be the largest crowdsourcing project ever sponsored by the Smithsonian. To supplement the indexing work done by FamilySearch volunteers, the Freedmen’s Bureau Transcription Project will transcribe word-for-word every document in the collection. When completed, the papers will be searchable online. This joint effort will help increase access to the Freedmen’s Bureau collection and help the public learn more about the United States during Reconstruction.

THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AFRICAN AMERICAN HISTORY AND CULTURE RECEIVES \$2.5 MILLION GIFT FROM THE LEBRON JAMES FAMILY FOUNDATION

NMAAHC announced that LeBron James will give \$2.5 million to support the museum and its presentation titled “Muhammad Ali: A Force for Change.” On view since the museum’s September opening, it tells the story of how Ali’s contributions transcended the world of sport—his commitment to challenging racial barriers helped lay the groundwork for the successful careers of so many African Americans in athletics and beyond.

James’ business partner Maverick Carter will also be part of the \$2.5 million contribution to the Ali exhibit. With this gift, the LeBron James Family Foundation and Carter will join the list of founding donors for NMAAHC.

“Every professional athlete, regardless of race and gender, owes a huge debt of gratitude to Muhammad Ali,” James said. “His legacy deserves to be studied and revered by every generation. I am honored to partner with the Smithsonian to celebrate one of the most influential figures in our nation’s history who, along with Jackie Robinson and Jesse Owens, used the power of sports to advance our civil rights.”

“I am overwhelmed by the incredible generosity LeBron James has shown to the Smithsonian’s National Museum of African American History and Culture and to Muhammad’s legacy,” said Lonnie Ali, Ali’s widow. “This exhibit will enable children visiting the Smithsonian to learn more about Muhammad’s work outside of the ring, particularly his humanitarian work and stance on social justice for all people.

Thank you to LeBron James and the Smithsonian for making this possible. I know that if Muhammad was alive today he would be honored.”

The story of Ali spans both the “Sports Gallery” and the “Making a Way out of No Way” Gallery. It includes collection highlights such as the heavyweight champion’s headgear and training robe worn at Dundee’s Fifth Street Gym. The exhibit allows visitors to look at Ali not only for his athletic achievement, but also for his achievements in community activism, resistance, politics, spirituality, and culture.

“We are extremely grateful to LeBron James for his support of the museum,” said Damion Thomas, curator of the Sports Gallery. “As the most socially active superstar in sports today, LeBron James is a testament to the influence of Muhammad Ali. Ali embodied the racial and social tumult of his times, blurring lines between politics and sports, activism and entertainment.”

In the 1960s and 1970s, Ali offered unwavering critiques of racism, heightened the profile of the Nation of Islam and raised awareness of the Vietnam War. After his boxing career, Ali continued to work globally as a force for change as a social activist, cultural critic, and humanitarian.

Ali is also featured in the Michael Jordan Game Changers Hall of the Sports Gallery, which looks at the contributions of athletes, community leaders and institutions whose actions changed their sport, transcended their game and transformed the country both on and off the field.

NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AFRICAN ART ACQUIRES YINKA SHONIBARE MBE’S “WIND SCULPTURE VII”

The National Museum of African Art acquired the outdoor sculpture “Wind Sculpture VII” by celebrated contemporary artist Yinka Shonibare MBE, installed in front of the museum on December 3, 2016.

Part of a series of seven individually designed sculptures, “Wind Sculpture VII” is the first artwork installed permanently in front of the museum. Constructed from fiberglass, this unique, gold-leaf version of Shonibare’s Wind Sculptures series evokes the sails of ships that have crossed the Atlantic and other oceans, connecting nations through the exchange of ideas, products and people.

In its form, it captures histories that can be inspiring or brutal but always complex. It suggests that the opening of the seas led not only to the slave trade and colonization but also to the dynamic contributions of Africans and African heritage worldwide. Using yellow, blue, rose and gold, Shonibare celebrates the



African men, women and children who have shaped the United States, Great Britain and other nations of today and for the future.

“The museum is proud to present this stunning and monumental public sculpture at the museum,” said Karen Milbourne, curator and project lead. “This work of art will transform the façade of our museum and pay tribute to the connections between Africa and America. The patterns emblazoned on this sculpture replicate so-called ‘African print cloth,’ which are in fact based on Indonesian batiks manufactured in the Netherlands and United Kingdom, and then exported to West Africa where they have become synonymous with African identity. Shonibare draws on this entangled history to direct attention to the global connections that unite individuals and communities worldwide. Africa’s global connections and the vision of its artists are the focus of this national museum; this sculpture will inspire visitors and spark conversation.”

SMITHSONIAN AMERICAN ART MUSEUM RECEIVES GIFT FROM THE COLLECTION OF MARGARET Z. ROBSON

The Smithsonian American Art Museum received a gift of 93 works of art from the collection of Margaret Z. Robson. The Robson collection includes important paintings, drawings, and sculptures by 48 major self-taught artists, including James Castle, Ulysses Davis, Thornton Dial Sr., William Edmondson, Howard Finster, Bessie Harvey, Judith Scott, Bill Traylor, and many others. The collection adds strength and depth to this specialty area of the collection with 11 new artists. The Robson gift comprises the largest acquisition of self-taught artworks in 20 years and signals the museum’s deep and lasting commitment to this area of artistic production. The museum’s acquisition of the collection, given by her son, Douglas O. Robson, was approved by the museum’s Board of Commissioners at its November meeting.

“We are truly honored to be entrusted with the stewardship of this work,” said Leslie Umberger, curator of folk and self-taught art. “The Robson collection has enormous range. It includes major works, such as William Edmondson’s ‘Untitled (Birdbath)’ and Bill Traylor’s ‘Untitled (Seated Woman).’ A 1942 relief carving by Ulysses Davis is a key example of the early work of a master wood carver who would become known for his presidential busts and wild beasts. The collection also includes exceptional works by lesser-known artists such as Albert “Kid” Mertz, whose painted stack of 1,265 railroad spikes was part of his vivid painted environment, and Leroy Person, who carved patterns into the window sills and doors of his North Carolina home before creating a large body of similarly incised abstract woodcarvings.”

Robson began collecting the work of folk and self-taught artists in the 1980s and became a highly respected collector and advocate. The artworks she selected reveal her personal point of view and preference for works that exemplify a particular culture, time and place.

“Margaret Robson was a thoughtful woman, with a keen eye and a unique personal vision,” Umberger said. “She began collecting at a time when few grasped the inherent value of art that was often made amid challenging circumstances and by those who lacked the agency of the mainstream art world. The collection speaks of empowerment and a ‘can-do’ spirit, and it will be cherished and shared here at the Smithsonian American Art Museum.”

Currently, four works from the Robson collection—hanging mixed-media assemblages by Emery Blagdon—are on view in the museum’s first-floor galleries. Other pieces from the collection will debut in 2017. Five Bill Traylor paintings from the gift will be included in the 2018 retrospective “Between Worlds: The Art of Bill Traylor” that Umberger is organizing. The museum will produce an exhibition and book dedicated to the Robson collection in its entirety at a future date.

The Smithsonian American Art Museum was among the first major museums to collect works by self-taught artists and to advocate for a diverse populist voice within the context of what is traditionally considered great art. The museum began collecting this kind of work in 1970, when the astonishing “The Throne of the Third Heaven of the Nations’ Millennium General Assembly,” made by James Hampton, came to light in a makeshift studio not far from the museum following the artist’s death. Several donors made it possible for this iconic work to become the cornerstone of a collection that aimed to tell an ever-expanding story of America through the art of its people.

In the early 1980s and 1990s, Chuck and Jan Rosenak donated many important works to the museum. The museum’s largest single acquisition of works by self-taught artists came in 1986 with more than 500 works from the ground-breaking collection of Herbert Waide Hemphill Jr., which firmly established the museum’s ongoing commitment to this work. Important gifts from Bill Arnett, David L. Davies, the Kallir Family, Judy A. Saslow, Mike Wilkins and Sheila Duignan, and others followed, and the collection has grown to be one of the most visited and widely admired of its kind.

Recent exhibitions featuring major acquisitions have included “Untitled: The Art of James Castle” (2014), “Ralph Fasanella: Lest We Forget” (2014) and “Mingering Mike’s Supersonic Greatest Hits” (2015). The museum has had dedicated gallery spaces for folk and self-taught art for more than 45 years. A new installation of these galleries, organized by Umberger, opened to the public October 21.