

# APPROACHING ABSTRACTION: AFRICAN AMERICAN ART FROM THE PERMANENT COLLECTION

La Salle University Art Museum

On view March 15 - June 15, 2017

Curator of Education and Public Programs, Miranda Clark-Binder

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# Introduction

- ▣ Our spring exhibition highlights La Salle University Art Museum's holdings of works by African American artists. The exhibition features 22 paintings, drawings, mixed media, and fine art prints which incorporate abstract ideas, forms, and techniques. Many of the artworks selected for this exhibition are marked by the persistence of the figural, approaching but not fully realizing abstraction. Some artists have intentionally combined both modes of artistic expression, figuration and abstraction, seeking a synthesis which retains the figure and its social implications in representing African American life. Other works suggest more symbolic connections with the past and the present, and reflect the increasing multiculturalism of American society.

# Vocabulary Terms

- ▣ **Abstract** – a concept existing as an idea that does not have a physical state.
- ▣ **Background** – the part of a picture or scene that appears to be farthest away from the viewer, usually nearest the horizon.
- ▣ **Cubism**- a style and art movement of the 20<sup>th</sup> century with the use of geometric shapes that often interlock. Without the perception of a single view point.
- ▣ **Harlem** – A section of New York City; Harlem has long been center of black culture.
- ▣ **Horizontal** – parallel to the horizon, level, flat.
- ▣ **Lithograph** - is a type of printmaking where the picture is drawn with a grease pencil on a stone. Then the stone is inked and put through a press to make the printed image.

# Vocabulary Terms Cont.

- ▣ **Mixed Media** – the use of different types of media used in a work of art?
- ▣ **Multiculturalism** – the support, presence and contribution of several distinct cultures within a society.
- ▣ **Pastel** – a crayon that is made with powdered pigments that is held with resin or gum. \***Resin**- a sticky organic substance.
- ▣ **Printmaking** - is the art of making a print. Printmaking allows artists to make multiple copies of an image.
- ▣ **Serigraph** – is a type of printmaking where the picture is created on paper, fabric or an object by way of pressing ink through a screen that has blocked areas by a stencil.

# Leading Questions

- ▣ Can you tell the difference between each type of print?  
(Serigraph, Lithograph or Pastel)
- ▣ What do you see in the work of art?
- ▣ How does this art make you feel?
- ▣ What does this art make you think about?
- ▣ What do you wonder about this work of art?

*Can you name some of the tools  
the builders are using in this  
image?*



Jacob Lawrence (1917 - 2000), American  
*Builders No. 3*, 1974  
Color Serigraph, Ed. 45/150  
Gift of Edward I. Bernstein  
La Salle University Art Museum, 79-G-1065

# Jacob Lawrence

Lawrence was one of the most successful and influential African American artists of the 20th century. Born in Atlantic City, NJ, he grew up in the Philadelphia area then moved to New York City as a teenager. He dropped out of high school at age 16 but took classes at the Harlem Art Workshop with Charles Alston. In 1941, when he was 23 years old, he completed his best known works, the *Migration Series*, a sequence of 60 paintings about the Great Migration of American Americans from rural South to the urban North, which were purchased by the Museum of Modern Art in New York and the Phillips Collection in Washington, D.C.

Many of Lawrence's artworks illustrate stories from African American history, as well as scenes from contemporary black culture. In the late 1940s, he began to explore the theme of Builders, which became the focus of another well-known series. He wrote, "The Builders came from my own observations of the human condition. If you look at a work closely, you see that it incorporates things other than the builders, like a street scene, or a family." With *Builders No. 3*, Lawrence depicts three male carpenters handling various construction tools. He employs a dynamic Modernist style, with flat planes of bold colors, formal rhythms, and an up-tilted picture plane. Beyond the workmen, the presence of pedestrians indicates the urban setting and suggests the vibrancy of city life.

*What is going on in this print?*



Romare Bearden (1911 - 1988), American  
*Piano Lesson*, 1983  
Color Lithograph, Ed. 5/10, AP  
La Salle University Art Museum, 85-G-1337



# Romare Bearden

Born in Charlotte, NC, Bearden grew up in New York and Pittsburgh, and graduated from New York University in 1935. He then studied with German artist George Grosz at the Art Students League of New York, while supporting himself as a political cartoonist for African American newspapers. He served in the U.S. Army during World War II and later studied in Paris and traveled extensively. His work became very abstract in the late 1950s and was often laden with spiritual symbolism, particularly in relation to African American life. He began to make collages in the early 1960s and was a founding member of The Spiral, an African American artistic and activist group. His work reflects the influence of Western art, African sculpture, Japanese prints and Chinese paintings.

In *Piano Lesson*, Bearden depicts a teacher standing over a student while giving a lesson. The image was inspired by the Pittsburgh jazz pianist Mary Lou Williams and was originally featured on a poster for a dance and musical collaboration between Bearden's wife Nanette and Williams. Recalling a 1917 painting by the same name by Henri Matisse, Bearden's image later inspired a Pulitzer prize-winning play by August Wilson in 1990.



Moe Brooker (b. 1940), American  
*Might Could*, 2000

Oil and Pastel on Paper

Purchased with funds provided by Michael Duffy, Dr. Helen North, Dr. Dennis O'Brien,  
and the Morrow-Farrell Family (In memory of Theodore Eggleston Morrow)

La Salle University Art Museum, 05-D-414

# Moe Brooker

Brooker approaches art-making as an inventive process of developing and working through ideas. His colorful abstractions express a joyous, spiritual energy and a spontaneity that the artist relates to the harmonies of jazz music. Brooker writes, “Formally, I attempt to create visual harmonies and jazz is often a metaphor. My work is really a celebration of life.”

Among other honors, Brooker received the 2010 Governor’s Hazlett Memorial Award for Artist of the Year by the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts. He studied at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts and Temple University’s Tyler School of Arts. He is currently a professor emeritus at Moore College of Art in Philadelphia.



Willie Cole (b. 1955), American  
*Pressed Iron Blossom No. 1*, 2005

Color Lithograph, Ed. 2/18

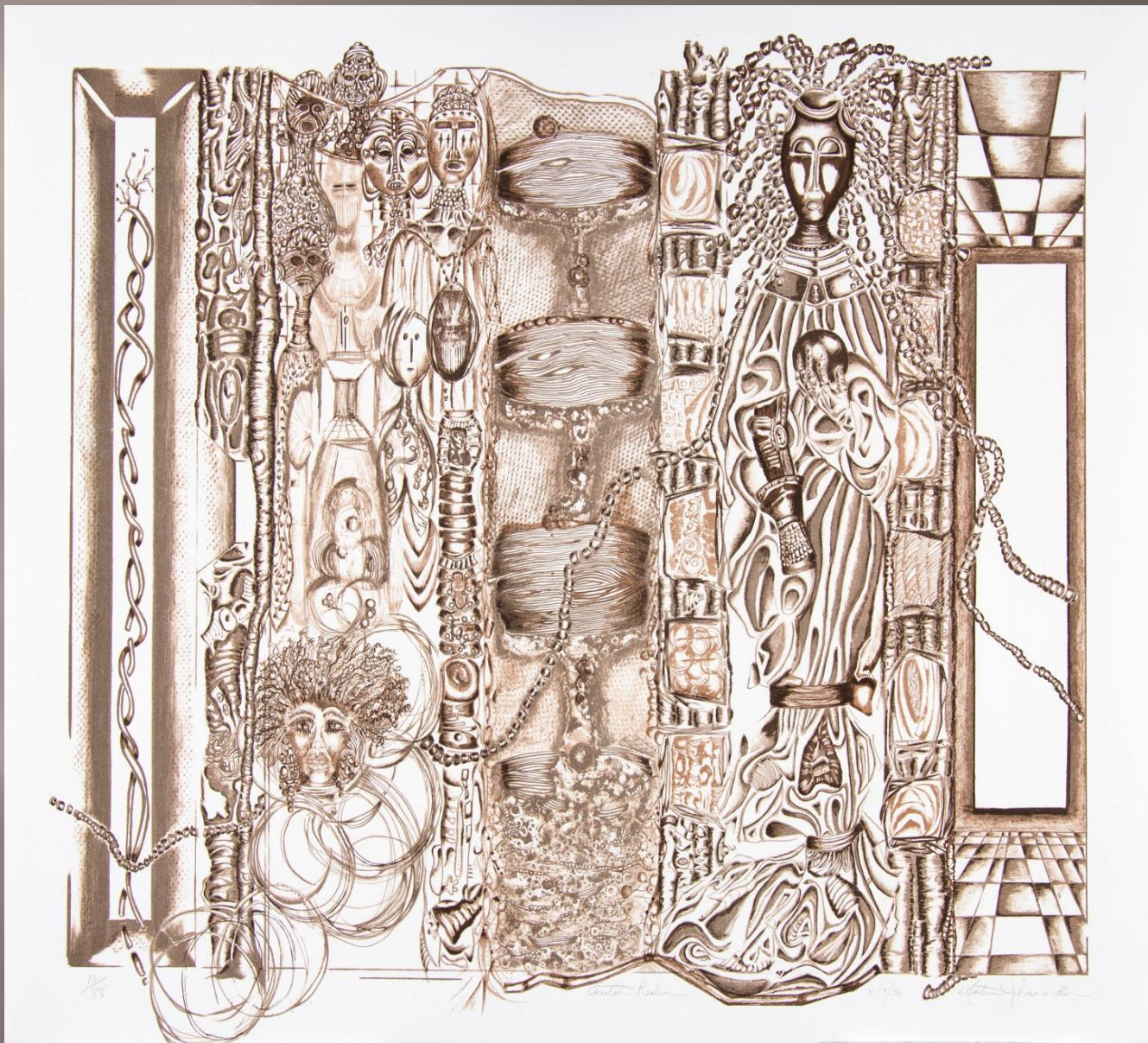
Purchased with funds provided by the Art Angels  
La Salle University Art Museum, 06-G-3323

# Willie Cole

Cole is a New York-based artist known for his mixed media sculptures, prints, and installations. Originally from Newark, NJ, he earned a B.F.A. from the School of Visual Arts in New York in 1976, and continued his studies at the Art Students League of New York from 1976 to 1979.

Cole has been altering perceptions of household objects since the 1990s. He ingeniously transforms steam irons, ironing boards, hairdryers, and high-heeled shoes into powerful sculptures, installations, and works on paper. Mining his own African American heritage, Cole creates work that celebrates African culture and confronts viewers with the painful history of slavery in America.

In *Pressed Iron Blossom No. 1*, Cole portrays a beautiful blossoming flower with petals of various shades of black and gray. The artist created the patterned design by pressing steam irons onto the surface of the print matrix. For Cole, steam irons evoke references not only to household goods, but also to African masks, and to the slave ships of the Middle Passage.



Martina Johnson-Allen (b. 1947), American  
*Another Realm*, 2006  
Lithograph, Ed. 10/88  
Purchased with funds provided by William and Klare Scarborough  
La Salle University Art Museum, 15-G-3734

# Martina Johnson-Allen

Johnson-Allen is a Philadelphia-based artist who earned a B.A. in Elementary Education from Pennsylvania State University, and an M.F.A. in Art Education with an emphasis on Printmaking from the University of the Arts in Philadelphia. Her art dwells on the spiritual and ritual aspects of art, expressing unconscious messages and the artist's connection with her inner self, her ancestral past, and contemporary culture. She writes, "My art making creates harmony, balance and comfort. It is a ritual that reveres, honors and communicates with my ancestors thus creating an acute awareness of my connection to nature and sense of purpose." *Another Realm* explores the artist's relationship with her ancestry through the inclusion of African masks as well as female figures intertwined with beads that symbolically express the spirituality of contemporary African women.

*Who are these two men?*

*Do you recognize the names  
the artist chose to include in  
this print?*

*Why are they important?*



Allan Edmunds (b. 1949), American  
200 Yrs, 2008  
Offset Lithograph, Ed. 31/80  
Purchased with funds provided by  
La Salle University Art Museum, 17-G-4992



# Allan Edmunds

Edmunds was born in Philadelphia and studied at Temple University's Tyler School of Art. He founded the Brandywine Workshop and Archives in 1972, which continues the great tradition of printmaking and artistic experimentation that has distinguished the Philadelphia arts community. Brandywine is a major source of opportunity for artists of all ages and backgrounds, especially artists of color, and is recognized internationally for its high standards of excellence and innovation.

Edmunds' lithograph, *200 Yrs*, celebrates the progression of African Americans in America. The outline of a slave ship in the lower left alludes to the Slave Act of 1808, which marked early efforts to abolish the slave trade in the U.S. On the lower right a portrait of Martin Luther King Jr. represents the fight towards civil equality for African Americans. Edmunds' print is dated 2008, the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Slave Act, and celebrates a new era in American history, with the election of Barack Obama as the first black president of the U.S. The print also features the names of African American heroes, slaves, soldiers, abolitionists, civil rights leaders, politicians, and educators, including Harriet Tubman, Booker T. Washington and Fredrick Douglass.

# Additional Resources

- ▣ African American Museum in Philadelphia :
  - <http://www.aampmuseum.org/>
  - <http://aampmuseum.us12.list-manage.com/subscribe?u=2e927a3c8a75d9ebd090dbb07&id=467a26e64b>
  
- ▣ National Museum of African American History & Culture :
  - <http://americanhistory.si.edu/>
  
- ▣ Smithsonian History Explorer:
  - <https://historyexplorer.si.edu/teacher-resources>
  - <https://www.edmodo.com/publisher/historyexplorer>
  
- ▣ La Salle University Art Museum Online database:
  - <http://artcollection.lasalle.edu/>

# Additional Resources Cont.

- ▣ Romare Bearden Foundation:
  - <http://www.beardenfoundation.org/artlife/biography/biography.shtml>
- ▣ Jacob and Gwen Knight Lawrence Foundation:
  - <http://www.jacobandgwenlawrence.org/>
- ▣ Willie Cole:
  - <http://www.williecole.com/index.html>
- ▣ Moe Brooker:
  - <http://moore.edu/about-moore/contact-us/directory/moe-brooker-1>

# Additional Resources Cont.

- ▣ Brandywine Workshop Archives:
  - <http://brandywineworkshop.com/>
- ▣ Brandywine Workshop on WHY?:
  - <http://why.org/cms/fridayarts/the-brandywine-workshop/>
- ▣ Jazz Music History on NPR:
  - <http://www.npr.org/series/10208861/npr-s-jazz-profiles>

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- ▣ Phone: 215.951.1221
- ▣ Hours: Monday – Friday, 10am- 4pm
- ▣ Contact: Miranda Clark-Binder,  
Curator of Education and Public Programs,  
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**We look forward to YOUR visit !**