

BLACK ART AND CULTURE IN THE 20TH CENTURY / Richard J. Powell.-New York, N.Y.: Thames and Hudson, dist. by W.W. Norton, 1997.--256 p.:ill.--ISBN 0-500-18195-0 (cl.), ISBN 0-500-20295-8 (pa.); LC 96-60366: \$29.95 (cl.), \$14.95 (pa.).

With this book, Richard J. Powell has achieved the difficult challenge of producing a survey text that is not only thorough and objective, but inviting and engrossing as well-- in other words, "a good read." This much-needed publication tracks the black diaspora from the beginning of the twentieth century to the present, using the terms of the "new art history" in (thankfully) an entirely accessible manner. Following a chronological arrangement couched in topical terms, the six chapters cover "the souls of black folk," "the New Negro," New Deal values, the impact of the civil rights and black nationalist movements, contemporary interpretations of blackness, and black culture as portrayed in the cinema. Certain themes recur throughout the entire text. One such thematic thread is Pan-Africanism, the incorporation of African themes, objects, and cultural motifs into modern art, often as a signifier of the artists' own African "roots."

Despite the author's definition of black diasporal culture as "the things that significant numbers of black people do," the book's title is somewhat misleading, since its focus is on the representation of African-American culture in the visual arts (including photography and cinematography). While significant black artists from Britain and the Caribbean region are included, the majority of the artists are American or expatriate American. And while Powell does a brilliant job of placing the artworks discussed in their cultural milieu, he does not attempt to survey twentieth-century black performing arts and literature. Nevertheless, it is precisely the author's compelling discussions of the selected art in context with its popular and sociopolitical, cultural surroundings that make his text so riveting. His intention to portray black culture as interpreted by both black and non-black artists distinguishes his text from earlier publications such as *African American Art and Artists* by Samella S. Lewis (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1990) and explains his inclusion of works by artists such as Robert Mapplethorpe, Larry Rivers, and Keith Haring.

A suitable literature survey and exhibition history is deftly woven into the overall text, not dryly isolated. The commentary by Powell, Professor and Chairman of the Dept. of Art and Art History at Duke University, is even-handed, extremely informed, and engaging. He has made the standard survey decision to denote importance by inclusion. While overall quite thorough in its coverage, there are a number of African-American artists who are not included in this book, among them Selma Burke, Elmer Simms Campbell, Frederick Flemister, Horace Pippen, William Artis, Charles Alston, and Juan Logan. The 176 illustrations range from the readily recognized to the rarely seen. Here are Henry Tanner's sentimental but luminous *The Banjo Lesson*, Raymond Saunders' 1964 portrait of boxer *Jack Johnson* (strangely prescient of Jean-Michel Basquiat), a screenlike abstract work by Alma Thomas, Jae Jarrel's 1970

Revolutionary Suit, featuring a front closure of bullets, and Margo Humphrey's tongue-in-cheek lithograph *The Last Bar-B-Que* (1988). One can only speculate as to why the publishers did not include more color illustrations for such an important book.

Of particular interest to researchers and librarians are the biographical notes for more than 160 artists mentioned in the text. The vast majority of these artists have been little documented, with only a few appearing in sources such as *The Dictionary of Art*. There are some curious omissions and inclusions: artists William E. Scott and Malvin Gray Johnson are discussed in the text but lack entries, while widely documented artists such as Norman Rockwell, Walker Evans, and Jean Renoir are included. Also included are a solid bibliography and a thorough index.

For educators, this book will no doubt serve as a popular course text; for students it will serve as a starting point of research into the work of artists that have for too long remained underappreciated and undocumented. The average reader will simply enjoy and learn. A highly recommended purchase for art and reference libraries.

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