

ARTnews

The Atlanta University Center Has Long Been a Home for Robust Scholarship of Black Art History

BY MELISSA SMITH August 2, 2023



The entrance to the Spelman College Museum of Fine Art, with a sculpture by Simone Leigh. PHOTO MICHEL JENSEN/COURTESY SPELMAN COLLEGE MUSEUM OF FINE ART

Shortly after the Los Angeles County Museum of Art acquired a 2020 portrait of Chadwick Boseman, titled *Forever*, by artist Bisa Butler, the museum put it on display, as part of “Black American Portraits,” an exhibition complementing its display of the Obama White House portraits. Butler shows the late actor, whose roles included Jackie Robinson, Thurgood Marshall, James Brown, and T’Challa, wearing a red-and-black cape; he stares back at you from a lush tropical landscape, a green rainbow encircles his head, halo-like.

That exhibition included more than 100 works, dating from 1800 to the present, by artists like Titus Kaphar, Karon Davis, Amy Sherald, Kehinde Wiley, **Lyle Ashton Harris**, and **Shinique Smith**. The goal was to tell a more expansive story of the African American experience. The

museum was due for this type of reappraisal. It had been nearly 50 years since LACMA had mounted the landmark 1976 show “Two Centuries of Black American Art,” curated by David C. Driskell. And because half of the works in “Black American Portraits” had been newly acquired by the institution, the exhibition’s significance “became not just about the show itself, but also about changing the face of the collection in perpetuity,” Liz Andrews, a co-curator of the show, explained.

But, when the exhibition traveled to Spelman College in Atlanta earlier this year, the show’s focus shifted. A member of the **Atlanta University Center**, a consortium that also includes Clark Atlanta University and Morehouse College, Spelman is an HBCU, an abbreviation for the more than one hundred institutions of higher education that have been educating Black students, most as early as shortly after the Civil War. In contrast to LACMA, a show like “Black American Portraits” can be viewed and understood in a different and more nuanced way at a venue like Spelman, which has long been a place where Black artists—and Black female artists, in particular—have always had a home.

Andrews has long considered the **Spelman College Museum of Fine Art** as a place where “you can go see a solo exhibition of an artist perhaps who has not gotten her due with history until that exhibition, or an artist who is *just* about to blow up in the art world,” she said. In 2018, Deborah Roberts had a solo show there, while Afro-Cuban artist Harmonia Rosales’s traveling solo show will open at the museum on August 18. In September, an exhibition focused on the museum’s permanent collection will begin a **five-venue national tour**, starting at Vassar College.

Art consultant Jeremiah Ojo, who grew up in Atlanta and has worked with artists like Alfred Conteh, Patrick Quarm, and Nontsikelelo Mutiti, echoed Andrews’s sentiment, saying “most of modern and contemporary Black art and artists have come out of the lineage of the Atlanta University Center” even if the mainstream art world didn’t turn its attention to Atlanta until 2020, when after “the George Floyd uprising and awareness, people began to realize that Atlanta actually has a lot to say about what is going on in Black America,” Ojo added.

The consortium has provided opportunities and developed scholarship around Black artists for decades, dating back to 1942 when artist Hale Woodruff, who also chaired the school’s art department, developed a juried exhibition—that became known as the Atlanta Annuals—exclusively for Black artists. That exhibition laid the groundwork for the unparalleled collection of work by 20th-century Black artists at Clark Atlanta University. Beginning in 1980, another juried show for Black artists from Atlanta was organized by the Atlanta Life Insurance, a Black-owned company that ended up amassing a voluminous collection of objects from artists including Jacob Lawrence, Romare Bearden and Elizabeth Catlett. Together, those shows were instrumental in the creation of the National Black Arts Festival in 1987, which helped solidify Atlanta as a hub for the arts.

The city has long boasted a committed group of art collectors, like Dameon Fisher, an orthodontist who has been living in Atlanta since the early days of the National Black Arts

Festival and focuses on acquiring work by artists with ties to the Southeast US. Kent Kelley, the CFO for a software company, who moved to Atlanta in 2010 recently jumped on board, too, after spending the past decade traveling to New York, Los Angeles, and elsewhere in the world to buy art.

For collectors like Kelley and Fisher, the university museum collections at AUC have been pivotal to learning more about the lineage of Black artmaking. “It’s very important for these individuals who are building these collections to educate themselves on the history of African American art,” Fisher said.

Fisher said he has noticed “a big increase” in Atlanta-based collectors lately, making “two different art scenes here: an older art scene that is part of the established Atlanta where you have people who have collected over the years, and they’re predominantly silent [about what they collect], and then another group of folks who are coming out to different events and sharing things on social media.”

At its core, though, the AUC is an academic center meant to train the next generation of art historians, curators, artists, and critics, which it has only been ramping up in recent years. Between 2018 and 2020, the Clark Atlanta University Art Museum participated in the Diversifying Art Museum Leadership Initiative, funded by the Walton Family Foundation and the Ford Foundation. That led to the creation of the Tina Dunkley Fellowship in American Art, a joint post-baccalaureate program with Kennesaw State University’s Zuckerman Museum of Art and the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Art meant to provide emerging curators with hands-on museum training. Spearheaded by the CAUAM’s then director Maurita N. Poole, the program’s two inaugural fellows were Nzinga Simmons and TK Smith.

Then, in 2019, the AUC launched the Art History and Curatorial Studies Collective, with art historian Cheryl Finley as the inaugural director, to train undergraduate students about a career in the visual arts. “Spelman and people like Cheryl Finley are outstanding for what they represent and how they are moving our students in Atlanta University to the center of this curatorial conversation,” said New York–based artist Derek Fordjour, who did his undergraduate studies at Morehouse.

Karen Comer Lowe, who became a curator in residence at the Spelman College Museum last year, called the program “one of the most dynamic programs for the nurturing of young Black students who want to enter museum spaces.”

Another reason that Atlanta has gotten mainstream attention as a rising arts hub in the US is the recent arrival of the UTA Artist Space, a contemporary art gallery run by Arthur Lewis and connected to the major Hollywood talent agency. After staging several pop-ups in the city, including one during the inaugural Atlanta Art Week last November, UTA Artist Space opened a permanent location in the city’s Midtown neighborhood in March.

“I personally think the spark in the [Atlanta] art scene came from UTA deciding to set up shop,” said Atlanta-based art advisor Kendra Walker, who started Atlanta Art Week. “That’s when I noticed my peers in other art cities seem more interested in the city of Atlanta as an arts hub.”

Artist Alfred Conteh said that while UTA’s arrival hasn’t necessarily changed anything on the ground in Atlanta, the city is definitely “getting some more eyes on it now,” he said. However, although Atlanta has “the largest airport in the world here, the biggest tech communities outside of California, and the entertainment industry—it’s Black Hollywood,” he wonders why an art fair hasn’t also come to town.

While an art fair might provide a financial influx into the city, several people said that although Atlanta has the AUC museums and the city’s encyclopedic one, the High Museum, the city still needs more venues to show contemporary art.

According to Conteh, Atlanta will be taken even more seriously as an arts hub when “an artist that has risen to national or international prominence through Atlanta,” he said.

As with any art hub, a delicate ecosystem consisting of artists, curators, collectors, and institutions have to work together “to wave those flags” to a national audience, Fordjour said. Together, they can “change the landscape and the trajectory of how we contextualize Southern African-American artists,” Conteh said.