Symbolic Imagery of African American Women

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By

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to all African American women, especially to

my Mother, Ellie Mae, my daughter, LaToya ,

and my four sisters, Phyllis, Brenda, Edna, and Francine.

May they continue to pass on the legacy of pride, honor, integrity, and their profound faith in God.

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Introduction

The Symbolic Imagery of African American Women

The history of black women in America prompts an examination of their representation in the work of African American art. To some extent, the interpretative symbolism of black women in visual art has yet to be realized and fully appreciated. The African American woman's significance is at times considered only as a symbol of laborious or maternal enhancement and Aunt Jemima-like physical features. However, their representation in art goes much further. This research study is designed to provide an interpretative and investigatory analysis of the symbolic imagery of black women in African American art. For the purpose of this study, the researcher will use the term "black women" interchangeably with "African American women". African American women, and/or black women, will be defined in this study as "black American women of African descent".

For the most part, African American art is a visual expression of feelings and life experiences of African Americans. Black art, in addition to representing an expression of black life experiences and aspirations, is the conscious and unconscious aesthetic contribution of black people to their struggle to rescue and reconstruct their history and humanity in their own image and interest (Korenga 2002). To fully appreciate and analyze imagery in African American art, it must be judged by its social criteria as well as its aesthetic criteria. Korenga (2002) further contended that the black aesthetics could be defined as a distinctive mode of artistic expression. It is also a distinctive standard by which black art can be identified and judged in terms of its creativity and beauty as well as social relevance.

Many African American artists have sought to portray life experiences, cultural heritage, courage and strength as a tribute to the African American woman. One example of this tribute is a mural created by John Biggers entitled *The Contribution of Negro Women to American Life and Education* (1952). This is a mural that was commissioned by Rev. Fred T. Lee as homage to his late wife, Dela. Dela Lee had been active in the Blue Triangle Young Women's Christian Association, which served the black women of Houston's third Ward. The mural is in the Blue Triangle YWCA in Houston, Texas, which is located in a primarily black section of the city. Biggers convinced Lee that a mural depicting the history of black women in America would be the best way to pay tribute to his wife. *The Contribution of Negro Women to American Life and Education* is a monumental statement of the struggles and achievements of black people as evident through their women. In this mural, Biggers honors all black women by focusing on women such as Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth and Phyllis Wheatly for their struggles and contributions to freedom. Harriet Tubman is a powerful and most commanding figure near the center of the mural. She holds a gun in one hand and torch in the other as she leads a throng of slaves to freedom. Sojourner Truth is portrayed as a tall figure with an outstretched hand, as if she was pointing the way to freedom for onlooking slaves. In the left portion of the mural, reference is made to Phyllis Wheatly, an internationally known poet of the eighteenth century. Here Biggers shows the importance of education. A mother reads to her child, symbolizing the importance of literacy as it is passed down from generation to generation. Biggers created a dramatic and bold effect by exaggerating images of strong female figures against a palette of oranges and blues. The

creation of this mural established the foundation for all of Biggers' images of black women in his work for the next forty years (Wardlaw, 1995).

The Contribution of Negro Women to American Life and Education, Biggers 1953

Like Biggers, other artists have captured the spirit and culture of the African American woman through various types of portrayals and art media. Such artistic portrayal served as an effective means of recording and sharing the history of the black woman. In order to understand African American women in art, one must understand African American history. The historical experiences of African American women trace back as far as enslavement. History has well documented the struggles, repression, and discrimination of African American women. In *Black Foremothers* (1988), Dorothy Sterling asserts that African American women in a historical context are portrayed as passive victims of slavery or racial oppression, rather than as active participants in American life (p.21). Historically, they have endured suffering and humiliation as no other American "race /gender," yet they remain a pillar of strength for the black family.

Any analysis of the African American historical experience, must examine the role of the African American Woman. From the early days of slavery to current day challenges, black women not only have been in the forefront of the African American uplift, but they also have proven to be effective leaders as well (James Haskins, 1999).

The influence and leadership of African American women always have been a central element in African American educational, cultural, and social development. Educationally, black women have led in molding and shaping the lives of their people in order to help them become productive citizens and leaders. Renowned black female educator Lucy Craft Laney stated, "Black women are the regenerative force to uplift the black race". Because of her dedication, many students in the early 1900's, including renowned educator Mary McLeod Bethune, went on to good colleges and became teachers and other civic leaders. As an educator and leader, Bethune stated, " I am my mother's daughter, and the drums of Africa still beat in my heart. They will not let me rest while there is a single Negro boy or girl without a chance to prove his worth." Bethune was determined to help make education available to thousands of African Americans (Igus, 1991). Both Bethune and Laney have been commemorated in various African American artworks throughout the 20th and 21st century for their leadership role as educators.

Black women have also played a major role in passing the rich cultural legacy of their race from generation to generation. There should be no debate about the degree of influence that black culture has on African American art. Black culture has to be considered the foundation of the history, heritage, imagery, dreams, hopes, and aspirations of African American artists and the black community. In *Culture and African American Politics,* Henry (1990) stated that the cultural sources of his art affirmed his ability to overcome oppression. Black culture is the patterned way in which African Americans do things together. In American society, black culture influences the artistic

perceptions of oneself and that of others in many ways. Black culture is very powerful in that it has the capacity to symbolically shape values, identities and aspirations.

I. Statement of Research Problem

The researcher will examine artworks of stereotypical depictions of African American women produced by modern and contemporary artists. In this analysis, the researcher will examine and interpret African American women in modern and postmodern artworks of six known African American artists.

II. Statement of Research Question

The question for investigation is as follows:

How have African American artists Betye Saar, Jeff Donaldson, William Pajaud, Sargent Claude Johnson, Artis Lane, and Eldzier Cortor depicted and incorporated symbolic imagery of African American women in their work? Consideration of the following issues will be required in responding to the research question:

a. The cultural experience of African Americans
b. The history of African American women
c. The stereotypical depictions of African American women in artworks of the twentieth century

III. Significance of the Study

In order to develop an appreciation for the imagery of African American women in African American Art, one must first be able to interpret their symbolic meaning, status, roles, and cultural portrayals. One must also develop an understanding of cultural

influences in African American art that depicts black women. This research is intended to:

a. Enhance the understanding of cultural influences in African American art that depicts black women.
b. Examine stereotypical interpretations of black women in African American Art in order to compare these to post modern imagery.

Definition of Terms

African American	An American person of color of African decent or a Black American.
African American Art	Art that is produced by African American individuals depicting African American subjects.
Artistic Symbolism	The skilled representation of significance of objects, events, or relationships by symbols or symbolic meaning.
Assemblage	A three-dimensional collage created from a group of everyday objects, many times pre-made and put together in a specific way.
Black Aesthetics	An artistic expression by which black art can be identified and judged in terms of creativity and beauty as well as social relevance (Korega 2002).
Black American	An American person of color of African descent, sometimes referred to as an African American.

Culture	Elements that add to the aesthetic aspects of life, enriching it with beauty and enjoyment; also a society or civilization marked by distinctive concepts, habits, skills, implements and art forms.
Hapticness	Having to do with touching or being exposed to.
Cancel Itself	To change the original meaning to a different one.
Symbolic Imagery	Images in art, which stand for or represent a particular meaning, not necessarily based on its outward appearance.

IV. Review of Literature

The focus of this study is on the symbolic imagery of African American women in African American art. The study is designed to dispel myths and inappropriate interpretations of artistic symbolism of black women by African American artists. This review will offer an analysis of previous research and related writings that shaped prevailing perceptions and interpretations of artistic portrayals of African American women. The review will be organized in the following sequence: (1) a brief discussion of the contributions of educator Viktor Lowenfeld and his influences on African American Art, (2) an overview of the history of African American women, (3) an overview of African American women's cultural experience, and (4) an analysis of African American imagery of women in art as it relates to the black experience.

Dr. Viktor Lowenfeld

This examination of the literature and study of African American art education and imagery begins with a discussion of Lowenfeld and his writings. Lowenfeld, an Austrian-born psychologist and artist, is noted for lending credibility to the field of

African American Art through the concept of hapticness. As a pioneer in the study of African American Art, Lowenfeld's writings accentuated the social value of African American artists and their ability to transition life experiences into unique artistic expressions and form. His publications include: *"New Negro Art in America"* (1944), *"New Negro Art Expression in America"* (1945), and "*Young Negro Artists"* (1943). These articles devoted particular attention to the African American experience and the problems associated with the ongoing plight of Blacks. In the American publication "*The Nature of Creative Activity"* (1939), Lowenfeld stated that social conditions caused haptic qualities. In this regard, his logic implies that the restricted space seen in haptic artwork expresses the social experience of the African American. He further contends that art is a representation that depicts the relationship between the artist and his life's experiences. Art styles and subjects (non-expressionistic art) copied from other artists, in Lowenfeld's opinion, was not real art. Lowenfeld saw expressionistic art as a way that gave black artists confidence in developing their own pictorial creative abilities (Smith, 1886).

Lowenfeld left Harvard University to go to Virginia's Hampton Institute specifically to inspire African American students, including renowned artist John Biggers. He helped to raise the self-esteem of black art students at all levels by encouraging them to identify with their African heritage. He also encouraged their participation in American history and social change.

Lowenfeld created the institute's first fine arts department. He began by displaying and discussing African sculpture. He stressed its religious and social role in African culture and the feeling of nobility and moral objective that inspired African art.

As a result, Lowenfeld began to alter students' view of their African heritage, helping them take pride in it and recognize their own uniqueness (Henderson, 1993). Under his instruction, he encouraged his students to explore the culture of their own people (Perry, 1992). It was at Hampton Institute that he also met artists Charles White and Elizabeth Catlett, who shared an interest in black history and a deep belief in the talent of black Americans (works by White and Catlett discussed later in the review of literature).

History and Culture of African American Women

The artistic images and symbolism of African American women are derived from their history and culture. Important elements of the image and the role black women play in African American Art are recorded in history. The portrayal of black women in America from slavery to the present represents a montage of suffering, love, labor, survival, and heroism. Black women continue to pass on a rich legacy of black traditions from generation to generation, enriching their culture.

History

Slavery of Black Women

The history of black women in American began when black foremothers were brought to American soil in chains as slaves. The strength of black women did not begin in America, but it was proven here. Not much has been written about the torture and rapes they endured en route to American. However, history does record a great deal about their enslavement in America. This enslavement involved humiliation, rape, abuse, and laborious chores that are inconceivable to today's African Americans. When black men and women arrived to America on slave ships, black women were treated no

differently because of their gender. They, too, were belittled and auctioned off on the slave block. Black slave women were beaten as black men were and in some cases even more deplorably. For instance, when it came to labor and punishment, motherhood, physical infirmity, or pregnancy were not considered (Fox-Genovese, 1988).

The coercion and rape of black slave women mostly by slave masters and overseers were common. Common as well was the emotional and sexual exploitation of some slave women, who were forced to marry men whom they did not love. These pairings were most often done solely for the purpose of slave breeding and economic gain on the part of slaveholders. As to be expected, children born as a result of these rapes and arranged marriages were the responsibility of the mother to raise and nurture, in addition to other laborious responsibilities (Blesser, 1991).

Jacqueline Jones, author of *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow* (1985), presents a heartrending account of the trials, tribulations, and abuse of enslaved black women. Jones discusses the responsibilities of black women as laborers and guardians of family and community stability from slavery to the present. The labor of black women was not confined to their masters' field and kitchen, or to their obligations as wives and mothers. Their obligations extended into in the areas of community welfare and the care of kin and neighbors. Older slaver women trained younger girls of the community, who were sometimes taken away from their maternal mothers as infants. Due to poor treatment of these young girls by new owners, slave women took on the responsibility of caring for and teaching them. They were taught to cook, clean, sew, and work in fields (Fox-Genovese, 1988). The unintended political consequences of black women's family duties

sometimes became apparent, such as when slave cooks stole food from their master's kitchen to feed hungry runaway slaves (Jones, 1985).

The plight of slave women was not limited to the exploitation of their skill and physical strength in the production of staple corps and the completion of other laborious chores. Female slaves also were also valuable to slaveholders as child bearers. These two objectives of owning slave women sometimes clashed. One focused on immediate profit returns and the other on long-term economic considerations. Pregnant women who spent long hours toiling in fields, picking cotton, hoeing with heavy iron hoes, and walking several miles a day often sustained damage to their reproductive systems immediately before or after giving birth. However, most slaveholders believed that labor was conducive to health and that a healthy woman would bear more children (Jones, 1985).

Older slave women would sometimes boast about their physical strength, perhaps as a means of passing on to their offspring their emotional strength, courage, pride, and determination. According to Jones, some elderly women reminisced about their mothers and grandmothers with a mixture of pride and wonder. She writes:

> Mary Frances Webb declared of her slave grandmother, "In the winter she sawed and cut cord wood just like a man. She said it didn't hurt as she was strong as an ox." Jane Scott's description of her mother implied the extent of the older women's emotional as well as physical strength: She was "strong and could roll and cut logs like a man, and was much of a woman." (p.18)

Working sometimes seven days a week, slave women were often released early from fieldwork on Saturdays so that they could do the week's laundering. These washings were done in iron pots, wooden tubs, or in creeks with washboards, with

wooden paddles, or batten sticks. Although laundering was a time-consuming and difficult chore, it provided an opportunity for slave women to have time together away from slave masters to socialize and sing old songs (Jones, 1985).

An excellent example of how contemporary artists honor women as typical slaves and laborers is seen the work of Betye Saar. Saars' washboard series depicts these women as survivors performing long hard laborious chores. She adds inspirational text to these pieces to honor these women's spirits of perseverance and hope.

Slave women should certainly be honored for their efforts to preserve the family unit and cultural traditions and their ability to persevere in spite of their struggles. This recognition is long over due and should no longer be overlooked because the indignities that they suffered is too shameful to be exposed. They should be honored, not only in written history, but also in other cultural areas such as the arts.

Although recognition of black female heroism should not be limited to well-known women such as Sojourner Truth and Harriet Tubman, the contributions of these two women in American history deserves to be mentioned. Sojourner Truth, referred to as freedom's messenger, was born Isabella Baumfree. She was a slave owned by several different masters in New York State. When slavery was abolished in New York her master would not free her, so she fled for her freedom. Motivated by her religious vision, she began her campaign against slavery. She became a traveling preacher dedicated to abolitionism and equality. Truth is an example of the type of women who had the courage to speak out in times of despair and by doing so, to encourage and inspire both men and women. Once, discouraged by the conditions of Blacks in America, African American abolitionist, Fredrick Douglas gave a gloomy speech of little hope for the

future black Americans. Truth asked, "Fredrick, is God Dead" (Igus, 1991). This was not to imply that she believed that God was dead, but to challenge Douglas with her belief that as long as God exists there was hope. Often physically beaten for speaking out against slavery, Truth continued her campaign. Her famous speech, which was given at the women's rights convention held in Akron Ohio in 1852, echoes the sentiments of many struggling women of her era who fought for equality and respect. An excerpt from this speech states:

> Look at me! Look at my arms. I have ploughed and planted and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man – when I can get it – and bear the lash as well! And ain't I a woman? I have borne thirteen children,, and seen most all sold off to slavery, and I cried out with my mothers grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain't I a woman? (Danzer, p. 258)

As Truth expressed, hard work was a central part of fact in the lives of most women. As women entered the emerging industrial workplace there continued to be calls for women's rights and other social reforms. Truth continues her speech by stating:

> .... If the first woman God ever made was strong enough to turn the world upside down all alone, these women together ought to be able to turn it back and get it right side up again! (Jacobs, p.1)

This dramatic speech serves as an example of her attitude about the strength and courage of women in America. Truth dedicated her life to the fight for black freedom, women's rights, and improving social conditions in the 19th century (Igus, 1991).

Harriet Tubman, sometimes referred to as the Black Moses of her people, was an extraordinary woman who possessed unusual courage and leadership. Tubman, a runaway slave, was born in 1820 or 1821 in Dorchester County, Maryland. As a young girl she suffered a severe head injury when an overseer hit her with a lead weight. This

blow damaged the brain and caused her to lapse into unconsciousness several times a day. To compensate for this disability, Tubman increased her strength until she was strong enough to perform tasks that were too difficult for most men. In 1949 she escaped to freedom. Feeling that she was ordered by God to do his work, she led over an estimated three hundred slaves to freedom by way of the Underground Railroad, a secret network of safe houses where runaways could stay on their journey north to freedom. During a ten years period she made nineteen dangerous trips to help other African Americans find freedom in the north. Neither Tubman nor the slaves she helped were ever captured (Danzer, (2003). She later became a leader in the abolitionist movement. She was also a nurse and a spy for the federal forces in South Carolina during the Civil War (Igus, 1991).

Because of the heroic acts by performed these women, many twentieth century artists pay tribute to them. An example of this, as mentioned the introduction, is seen in John Bigger's painting, *The Contribution of Negro Women to American Life and Education.* Whites also paid homage their heroism in his drawing, *General Moses* (1965) and his painting *Five Great American Negroes* (1939-1940).

Freed Black Women

Jacqueline Jones (1985) argues that the legacy of human bondage persisted long after emancipation. Black women felt the weight of racial discrimination whether they toiled in the southern tobacco fields at the turn of the century and or in Chicago kitchens of white employers in the 1950s. She further contends that in their efforts to sustain family ties and preserve a vital group culture, they shared a common purpose with other wives and mothers of all races and classes (Jones, 1985).

The postbellum era and the end of the Civil war signaled the first chance for blacks to leave slave quarters as a demonstration of their freedom. When one slave woman was asked why she wanted to leave her master's South Carolina plantation, she replied, "I must go, if I stay here I'll never be free". Many other freewomen also left to escape from the confinement of the place where they had lived as slaves. Some free women returned to their former master's plantation to work in order to feed their children when they were unable to find work elsewhere. Having no other alternative, some continued to toil as they had under slavery, and thus remained susceptible to punishment (Jones, 1985).

Freed black women sometimes paid dearly for their freedom and assertiveness. If they spoke, dressed, or acted like free women, they were punished. Illegal whippings were common for any number of "offenses." Free women dared not to complain about unfair wages for fear of assaults by or ordered by their employers. Their dress could not resemble that of free women without reproach. The wearing of veils, parasols, and handkerchiefs by black women was offensive to southern whites, as this symbolized equality and the freedom for blacks that they so strongly opposed. They associated impudent behavior with freedwomen's dress that defied the tradition code of southern relations. However, for freewomen, colorful and elaborate clothes served to announce their new status. Husbands took pride in buying fashionable dresses, colorful ribbons, and pretty hats for their wives (Jones, 1985).

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the responsibility and demand on the freed black women did not change significantly at all. Their lives were still structured around household chores, fieldwork, childcare, and community welfare

activities. To make ends meet, some women took jobs caring for white children, cooking, or laundering. A woman would collect the laundry of two or three families on Monday, set up wash pots in her yard, and instruct the children to help out by drawing water for the wash. Clothes were washed, starched, hung up, and ironed. On Saturdays the clean clothes were returned and money was collected if her customers were satisfied.

Black women in the nineteen and twentieth centuries continued their labor in America as survivors of economic hardship, whether it was sharecropping in the cotton fields of the south or working in factories of urban areas and ghettos of the north. Their hard work, religious faith, culturally shaped resilience, and determination continued to be the compelling force that would keep the family intact.

During the twentieth century, many black women made outstanding contributions in American history. Besides the obvious mother and wife or single parent/breadwinner role of the average woman, celebrated black women of that century contributed in areas such as education, civil rights, inventions, the arts, the media, and politics.

Education and Skill

Sewing and school teaching were considered refined occupations for black women during this era. Sewing provided the opportunity for women to become self-employed, but with no specific salary. Teachers were held in high esteem in the black community. Teaching for black women was also attractive because it was considered a proper female occupation by the larger society. Education played a key role in the advancement of blacks in America. Frances Jackson Coppin, the first African American in the United States to receive a college degree, serves as an example of educators in the

nineteenth century. According to Toyomi Igus in her *Book of Black Heroes* (1991, Vol.2) Coppin states:

> "In my class, I felt that I had the honor of the whole African race upon my shoulders. I felt that, should I fail, it would be ascribed to the fact that I was colored."(p. 12)

An example of a noted twentieth century black woman educator of legendary acclaim is Dr. Mary McCleod Bethune. Bethune was born to a former slave a decade after the Civil War. She dedicated her life to ensuring the rights of education and freedom for black Americans. Among many other contributions, Bethune is most known as the founder of the Daytona Normal and Institute which evolved into the Bethune Cookman College.

Invention and Entrepreneurship

Before the twentieth century few black women had the opportunity to become entrepreneurs. However one such woman was the first black female millionaire, Madame C. J. Walker. In 1910, Walker became famous for her invention of the straightening comb and other hair-care products for black women. Although using the straightening comb involved changing the natural state of black hair, straightened hair became more acceptable and preferred. This new style changed the image of black women while setting a new standard for black beauty for that era. The popularity of these products led to a very wealthy life style for Madame Walker.

Visual Arts

Over the years, the works of many great black female artists have gone unnoticed. However, some works by certain black female artists make statements that are so powerful that they cannot be ignored. An example of this recognition is the work of Edmonia Lewis. Lewis was the first black woman to be acknowledged as a sculptor.

She created sculptures that told stories and some busts of famous people who fought to end slavery (for example, John Brown, Chales Sumner, Col. Rovert Gauld Shaw, and William Story). One of her most famous works is the sculpture *Forever Free* (1867-68). *Forever Free* is a study of a black man with broken chains and a clenched fist, and the other hand protects his wife as he embraces freedom. Not only did she express antislavery sentiments in her work, she also was involved in antislavery movements such as the Underground Railroad (Bearden, 1993).

The Media

When Black female actors were given roles in the media in the early 1900's, they were usually stereotypical ones. Most black women portrayed were either slaves or maids. The parts usually called for them to simply do their duties, seldom talk, be obedient, and smile to show their contentment with their status as a servant. In some cases, for instance, they had to appear child-like or play the part of fussy maids who looked out for the best interests and well being of their boss. In the 1930's actresses, such as Butterfly McQueen and Hatti McDaniels played stereotypical roles that that reflected how movie producers hoped that black women would be perceived. McQueen played a naïve, squeaky voiced assistant cook, waitress, and maid who identified herself as the stereotypical inferior character, Prissy, in the film *Gone with the Wind* (1939). Her career floundered later because of her unwillingness to continue to play such roles. Hatti McDaniels' headdress, language, physical attributes and happy demeanor created the mammy stereotype that the producers wanted. However, McDaniel played these roles in a somewhat different manner. She sometimes made them wise and outspoken, which

earned her acclaim in the film industry. She became the first black actor to win an Oscar (Diawara, 1993).

Despite the obvious stereotyping roles McDaniel and McQueen played, considering their talent and the limitation of the star system, they both obviously made a unique contribution to the American film industry (Diawara, 1993).

Later portrayals of black women in films were a mixture of both controversial and positive. Some viewers saw the roles of the women of the 1985 film *The Color Purple* as an opportunity to view black women as strong and empowering individuals, while others saw the film as a negative representation of black men.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, black sitcoms such as the *Cobsy Show* presented a new and more favorable image of black women to American television viewers. Phylica Rashad portrayed Clair Huxtable, a middle to upper class lawyer; mother of five children, wife of Cliff Huxtable (Bill Cosby), who is portrayed as an obstetrician. To most African American viewers, the Huxtables represented the ideal American family, and the role of Clair Huxtable represented the perfect wife, mother, and professional woman.

Civil Rights and Politics

During the Civil Rights period, the struggle for equality for African American women took on two fronts simultaneously. Many black women who fought for equal rights for blacks also fought for equality for women. Women such as Rosa Parks, Fannie Lou Hamer, Coretta Scott King, and Angela Davis were active pursuers of equality during of this period. Rosa Parks, known as the mother of the Civil Rights movement, refused to give up her seat on a Montgomery, Alabama bus in 1955. Parks' arrest led to a

three-hundred-and-eighty-one day boycott, which ignited the civil rights movements and changed America (Lanker, 1989).

Fannie Lou Hammer, sharecropper and civil rights activist of Montgomery County, Mississippi, was best known for her courageous stand for voting rights for black Mississippians in 1962. Her statement, " I'm sick and tired of being sick and tired", voiced her intense frustration and discontent with the situation of blacks. Speaking in behalf of the struggles of black women, Hamer states:

> "The special plight and the role of black women is not something that just happened three years ago. We've had a special plight for three hundred and fifty years."(Igus, p.17).

Corretta Scott King's contributions to the civil rights movement were sometimes overshadowed by the enormous popularity and contributions of her husband, Dr. Martin Luther King. However, she worked side by side with her husband, and yet she was able to carrying out the responsibility of raising their four children (Lanker, 1989).

Angela Y. Davis may still be perceived by some as a symbol of militancy of the late 1960's and early 1970's. Concerned about the plight and struggle of her people, Davis worked with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), Black Panthers, and eventually joined the Communist party (Lanker, 1989). Whatever her political status, Davis' activism and outspoken beliefs about civil rights and women's rights became a powerful symbol for many Americans. Although not always credited as a hero in light of her political activist views, her action as a black woman has made a dramatic impact on the issues of racism and feminism in American history.

During the period of the Black Power movement of the sixties and seventies, many women and men reverted back to the natural state of their hair or the "afro" and dressed in the African dashiki and head wraps or caps. This new attire and fad expressed

the pride in their African heritage and culture, and this style continued for some years to follow.

Political figures such as Senator Barbara Jordan and Congressman Shirley Chisholm and are among other black female figures who succeeded in breaking though barriers of racism in the Twentieth Century. They served as important icons for their outstanding leadership and stamina. According to Brian Lanker's book, *I Dream a World* (1989), Chisholm states:

> "We've been helping everybody except ourselves. The time has come and we will be no longer the complacent, placid, armchair recipients of whatever anybody is going to bequeath to us. I want to organize black women in the country so that they'll become a force to be dealt with."(p. 106)

Thanks to the many contributions of women of the past, today black women are given the opportunities to contribute in all avenues of life. Famous black women such as Condoleezza Rice, Oprah Winfrey, Maya Angelou, and countless others, have contributed a great deal as positive role models for both the female gender and the black race. Their successes have fulfilled the dreams of the foremothers who fought hard and paved the way for future generations.

Culture

Culture in a general sense is considered a way of life, ways of during things, and all the ideas by a group of people. Culture includes arts, beliefs, customs, inventions, languages, and traditions (The World Book Encyclopedia, 2002). Black culture may be defined as an acknowledged collection of life experiences, social expressions, transmitted behavior patterns, beliefs, and traditions of black folks. This combination is the sum of what promotes solidarity and camaraderie that creates community. People may not

realize how greatly culture influences their behavior until they are exposed to a different way of doing things.

For black artists who have chosen to artistically express their experiences and the truths about black women, this culture is evident in their artwork. Black male and female artists must be exposed to or should have a keen knowledge of the cultural practices of black women. Black women share their culture in ways that are unique in expression, whether it is in religious worship, dress, hair styles, arts, cooking, or socialization.

Religion

Historically, black women have always possessed a fierce faith in God. Religious practices in among black women in America date back as far as slavery, whether it was secret prayer and worship or Negro spirituals they sang in cotton fields. They have upheld their faith as a source of strength and endurance for generations. Because religious beliefs and worship were the central values of their lives, leaders and educators such as Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, and Mary McCloud Bethune all probably would have become ordained as clergywomen if that were an option that was available to them. Instead, they channeled their energies and service in other areas of leadership (Lincoln and Mamiya, 1990). Today the black church continues to be a central influence in the lives of black women. This researcher has observed that there are a large number of black women today who serve as clergies and evangelists. Furthermore, in black churches black women make up at least eighty percent of the congregation as compared to that of black men. This is another indication of the religious dedication and unwavering faith of black women.

Fashions and Hair Styles

Black women's unique and fashionable attire when attending church is a tradition that continues to dominate other alternatives of dress despite the recent trends of more casual looks. Until recently, it was unheard of for black women to wear slacks to church, regardless of their religious faith or affiliation. However, more and more black women are gradually adopting this new trend.

Black women wearing "church hats" have been an African American tradition for decades. When she was a child, the researcher recalls her mother never setting foot in church without wearing one of her most beautiful hats. Today at age eighty-six, she still wears some of the most fashionable hats in her church. According to Michael Cunningham and Craig Marberry's dynamic book *Crowns: Portraits of Black Women in Church Hats* (2000), "Countless women would rather attend church naked than hatless. For these women a church hat, flamboyant as it may be, is no mere fashion accessory; it's a cherished African American custom, one observed with boundless passion by black women of various religions". Some credit the origin of this custom to the biblical scripture Apostle Paul writes in I Corinthians 11: 5, " But every woman that prayeth or prophesieth with her head uncovered dishonoureth her head." This was a decree that a woman cover her head when at worship to symbolize her submission and obedience to God. This biblical belief has been passed down from generation to generation. The wearing of church hats by black women is a convergence of faith and fashion that to some religious believers, keeps Sunday or the Sabbath day both holy and glamorous (Marberry, 2000).

Ellie Hill: Mother, (2003)

Lillie Barnes, (2003)

Earlean Sweet, (2003)

Jackie Utley, (2003)

Photographed by Fayetha Fullwood

Not only is fashion for black women an important part of the history and culture of the church, it was very much a part of the cultural trend of the Harlem Renaissance era. During this period black women as well as men took pride in wearing high fashioned styles. Black women wore unique and stylish hats and full raccoon and fur trimmed coats for their nights out or to special affairs (Driskell, Lewis, and Ryan, 1987).

During the sixties and seventies cultural dress apparel, as mentioned in the history segment of this study, was quite different. Some black women wore the "afrocentric" look as a way of connecting and relating to their cultural roots. Today, except for special occasions such as Black History celebrations, dashikis and other African apparels are seldom worn. However, the wearing of fashionable braided hairstyles that imitate traditional West African styles is still very popular. African Americans have also used their West African roots and their own artistry to create styles and standards that reflect a uniquely black culture (Robinson, 1999). Other popular styles that take advantage of natural texture of black hair are dreadlocks, twists, and corkscrews. Blacks have also adopted hairstyles that reflect European standards of beauty, such as straight or curly hair. Because of the diversity of hairstyles and their cultural significance, hairdressers serve a special function in the African American community.

Cultural Arts

The artistic expression of African American women encompasses a broad spectrum of talents and media. The Harlem Renaissance announced a great cultural awakening. It provided an opportunity for the exhibition of cultural expressions of a number of African American artists in various areas such as visuals arts, literature and poetry, dance, drama, and music. However, for the purpose of this study, the researcher will focus on the visual arts area.

An important contributor to the development of the Harlem Renaissance is artist Meta Warrick Fuller. Her contribution and talent is an example of black female leadership that helped to change the perceptions of black culture and to promote a sense of black pride in America. The subjects of her sculptures exemplify the prevailing political and social climate of her time and culture. Some of her finest works included *Ethiopia Awakening* (1914), a portrayal of a woman awakening from a deep sleep of the past, who nevertheless sees the contemporary condition of black people of the present; and her 1919 *Mary Turner (A Silent Protest Against Mob Violence)*, a moving portrayal of a woman struggling to define and free herself (Driskell, 1987).

Undoubtedly, of all forms of cultural art by African American women, quilting is perhaps one of the oldest. Although the art of quilting was probably not apart of African culture, since quilts were not a necessity in such hot climate, patterns and geometric designs of quilts done by African American women suggest that these designs were a linkage to their African heritage. African women who were bought to the New World combined their own textile traditions with American quilting traditions, creating unique Afro-American quilts. These combined ideas were passed down from generation to

generation, while preserving the African textile tradition. Whereas Euro-American appliquéd quilts are primarily decorative, African-American quilts tell stories and/or are designed in the same manner as African appliquéd textiles. Using bold colors and shapes, African cultures record histories and religious values, creating designs that symbolize power, leadership, balance, and courage (Wahlman, 2002). Story quilts is believed to date back even before the biblical story quilts of Harriet Powers, who was born a slave in 1837. Story quilts continue to be a unique form of art today as seen in the story quilts of Faith Ringgold and Betye Saar. Historically, quilts were made for everyday use out of necessity. However, over the years more and more African American Women have had the opportunity to enjoy quilting for pleasure rather than necessity. Their works may range from those with strong African influence to traditional quilting.

Cooking

Cooking is another art form for most black women. Black women for generations have taken pride in perfecting traditional recipes for their families and friends. Sunday dinner is one of the most common and beloved rituals of the African American community. Black women for generations have prepared Sunday dinners, providing an opportunity for family and friends to gather and enjoy good old-fashioned laughter and fellowship (Poe, 1998). African American cultural dishes or "soul food," named for the soulful cooking of generations of black women, have provided mouth-watering meals that have a history as far back as slavery. The sharing of food is a part of the African American culture that survived the hardships of slavery. In order to feed their families, women cooked the sections from slaughtered cows and hogs that were considered undesirable for white masters and their families. Meals such as oxtails, pig's feet,

chitterling (pork intestines), hog head cheese, salted fish, and greens were prepared in a tasteful manner that provided filling meals for hard working, hungry slaves (Harris, 1996). Today, tables of Sunday gatherings are heaped with black-peas, collard greens, chicken, potato salads, and barbequed meats and other traditional African-American dishes. The aroma from these dishes hits you as you walk in the door after Sunday church services.

Black Women and Front Porches

Front Porches have served as a greeting and a communion place for black women since it's invention in the black community. Whether it was on the porches of shotgun houses of the south or contemporary homes of urban communities, the purpose of the gatherings seem to be the same. Originally, front porches were probably designed as a place to escape the sweltering heat of indoors or to entertain visitors on hot summer days. However, for black women the front porch has also developed into a place of communion and neighborhood gossip. As a child, the researcher recalls times when some of the neighborhood women would meet and pass hints about various people and incidences that took place. Aware that children were around, they sent them into the yards to play as they watched them and proceeded with their gossip.

Since the braiding a little girl's hair required a tremendous amount of time, the braiding sometimes took place on these porches as friends visited there. Although the women passed hints and eliminated names in the course of their gossip, these little girls would somehow figured out who and what the conversation was about. Conversations were not always about gossip though. Sometimes family history or family tales and

Bible stories were told. Whatever the conversation, there was hardly ever a boring moment, which may have contributed to continuation of this warm and inviting tradition.

This researcher recently observed, while riding through a newly developed predominately black community, that this traditional front porch communion still exists. Two or more women were gathered, sitting and talking on front porches of various houses as women did many years ago. For the researcher, having lived in a predominantly white neighborhood, this custom is seldom seen.

The history and culture of black women has helped to provide an understanding of their uniqueness as individuals and of their contributions as American citizens. While black women have made significant contributions to the struggle for justice in America, much more needs to be done to keep the legacy of black traditions alive. In an article entitled *Further to Fly*, Sheila Radford-Hill argues that black women must revive their legacy of activism and reclaim the tradition of nurturing in the black community. She contends that black feminism is essential for the entire black community. In all cultures there are culture bearers, and they must be preserved in order for that culture to survive. Hill further asserts that it is the women who have been the culture bearers of the black community, whose responsibility has been to transmit black survival values to black women and men (Hill, 2003).

African American Images in Art

Not all artists have portrayed black women as having positive characteristics. Nancy Green, who was born a slave, portrayed the first Aunt Jemima in real life. She was featured at the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago. Green, as Aunt Jemima, cooked pancakes, sang songs, and told stories of the Old South. In 1933, Anna Robinson

became the second Aunt Jemima and was featured at the Chicago Century of Progress Exhibition. Her likeness was captured in a painted portrait for the Aunt Jemima product (Kendrix). For years, the "happy mammy" symbol was used to market Aunt Jemima pancakes and syrup. The advertisement featured a plump Aunt Jemima wearing a bandanna. The bandanna symbolized slavery for many African Americans. Over time, the Quaker Oats Company changed the bandanna to a headband. In 1980, the headband was removed, and Aunt Jemima was given a more modern and professional look. The new Aunt Jemima was slimmer with a hairdo and pearl earrings. She resembled a black Betty Crocker; a refreshing politically correct image of Aunt Jemima (Fuller).

Aunt Jemima and other stereotypes, such as Hatti McDaniel's Mammy roles, Butterfly McQueen's role as Prissy in *Gone With the Wind* (1939), and the Sapphire figure of *Amos and Andy Show,* portray negative and undesirable images of black women in the media. Other stereotypical names used in the media when referring to African Americans in general were mulattoes, coons, mammies, Sambos, Toms, and big black bucks. In the case of children, names such as Topsy (considered a child female coon) and pickaninnies were used (Diawara, 1993). Other images in advertisements and on consumer products are Uncle Ben and Rastus, and the Jezebel/bad-black girl image used in pictures and textile designs. These stereotypical names have had negative effects not only on the self-images of blacks, but also on how individuals of other races perceive Africans Americans. According to the California Newsreel's article on the film *Ethnic Notions* (1987):

> Loyal Toms, carefree Samboos, faithful Mammies, grinning Coons, savage /brutes, and wide-eyed Pickaninnies roll across the screen in cartoons, feature films, popular songs, minstrel shows, advertisements, folklore, household artifacts, and even children's rhymes. The dehumanizing

> caricatures permeated popular culture from the 1820s to the Civil Rights period and implanted themselves deep in the American psyche. (p.1)

In contrast to the Aunt Jemima and other stereotypical images, African American artists have sought to depict the positive images of black women, while promoting a sense of pride and cultural appreciation. Some African American artists envision their art as an opportunity to express the sentiments of black people in regard to political and social issues. The following analysis of works by John Biggers, Elizabeth Catlett, Charles White, and Faith Ringgold give brief interpretations of the symbolic imagery of African American women in African American art.

John Biggers

John Biggers is arguably one of the most prolific and celebrated African American artist of the past century. Biggers, a native North Carolinian, has produced several works of art that depict black women in various African American scenes. As a student of Viktor Lowenfield, Biggers considered art as a means of enhancing the identity and self-esteem of African American people (Bearden and Henderson, 1993). An example of Biggers' style can be seen in Wardlaw's 1995 publication of *The Art of John Biggers: View from the Upper Room.* In his publication, *Ananse, The Web of Life in Africa (*1979*),* Biggers focuses on his African heritage and its role in molding his persona.

Artistic symbolism is an element of art that offers much intrigue and provide parameters for self-artistic expression. Biggers is perhaps one of the most noted artists of the twentieth-century who used positive symbolism of black women. Biggers depicts positive black women as symbols of beauty, respect, honesty, strength, and a love of family and culture. Beginning with his zeal to discover his cultural roots and incorporate

them in his works, Biggers sought to emphasize the representation of black women because of his connection and personal experiences. In an interview conducted by the researcher with John's wife, Hazel, Mrs. Biggers explains:

> "John felt that an artist should paint what they know. He grew up in a community with shotgun houses. He recalls women sitting on porches talking to each other from porch to porch. He had a lot of respect for women because he saw their contribution to the their family; the sewing, cooking, washing clothes, and making quilts. He saw them as a strong support for the community as well as the family."

In another interview conducted by the researcher with James Biggers, nephew of John Biggers, James explains that his uncle often used sacred geometry in his works, from the triangle roofs to shotgun houses to the circle, symbolizing mother. He further stated:

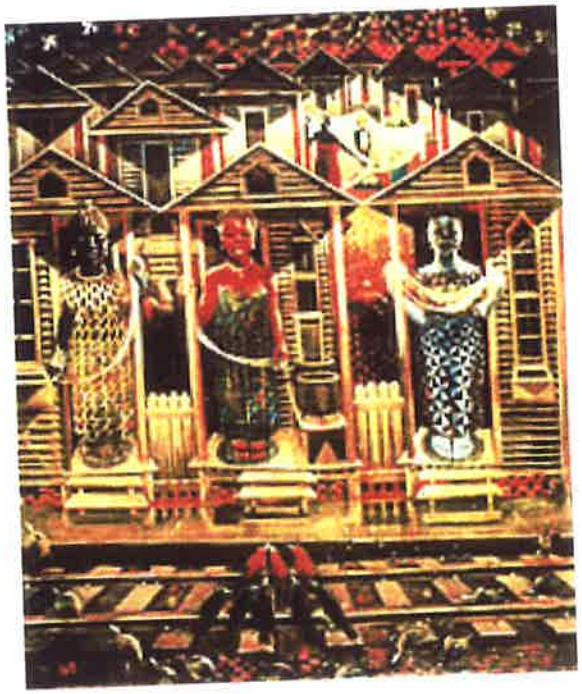
> "The circle to John symbolized the universal earth. The earth itself symbolized mother in terms of the female form, representing regeneration, and rebirth. The black circle-shaped wash pots used quite often in John's drawing were all a part of that symbolism. John stated once that in showing his work to a group of children, he found it ironic that one little girl who was white said), 'that wash pot looks like my mommy's belly' (referring to her pregnant mother)".

The shotgun houses and black women were often depicted together in Biggers' work with strong and positive symbolism of stability and endurance. In the video interview, *John Biggers' Journeys,* produced by Barbara Forst, Biggers states (in reference to the home),

> " It relates to the meaning of a place of fire, and I'm talking about the birthing fire. And at the roofline of every shotgun is a sacred triangle, which is a fire and it is supported by a square or rectangle. These are concepts of sacred geometry that all the temples of the

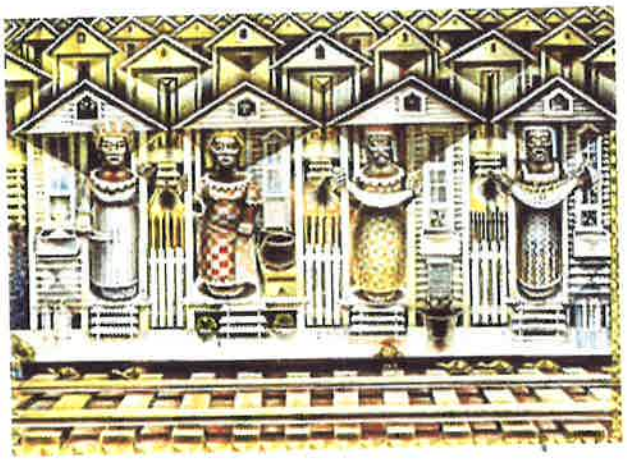
world are built with. That's why when you walk into your temple you walk back into your mother's womb. This is your place of comfort. This represents mother." (Forst, 1996)

Many black artists have used shotgun houses as a symbol of culture. The shotgun house is derived from African architecture with triangular peaks and a layout of rooms one directly behind another. A shotgun could be fired through such a house from front door through the back door without hitting anything. The traditional assumption was that shotgun houses are designed to allow circulation of air from front to back. However, shotgun houses in Houston, New Orleans, Montgomery, Augusta, and Savannah also fostered black communal life and culture. Houses were usually built in a row, side by side. Their porches were considered an ideal meeting ground for the exchange of neighborhood news. Because of the cultural history and tradition of black women and their occasional meeting and communion on front porches, the women in Biggers' painting, *Shotguns, Third Ward* (1989) serve as symbols of this culture (Wardlaw, 1995).



John Biggers, *Third Ward*

Biggers' *Four Seasons* (1984), a lithograph, depicts four women standing on the porches of shotgun houses. They are symbolic of the steadfastness of African American women throughout all the seasons of the year. Each woman represents a different season of the year. The clues to which season they represent may be found in their dress styles, head coverings, and the colors they are wearing (Getty, 1994).



John Biggers, *Four Seasons*

The painting *Shotgun, Third Ward # 1* (1966) illustrates a scene from Houston's predominantly, African American Third Ward community where Biggers lived. This painting is one of the earliest to employ three motifs that became ubiquitous symbols in his later works: the wheel, shotgun house, and a lit candle. In this painting, Biggers' portrayal of African American women as strong, a constant theme, is done as bold relief figures in the painting's foreground (Perry, 1992). The fact that they are bold relief figures and that they stand tall over others in the around them indicates the artist's intention to portray them as the strength of the community. A church burns in the background as these women watch fearless on a rain-drenched street. A lit lantern held by an elderly man symbolizes hope for the rebuilding of the church.

John Biggers, Third Ward #1

In reference to his lithograph, *The Upper Room* (1984), which depicts two southern women carrying a building upon their heads, Biggers states in the John Biggers video interview:

> "Where any woman goes, she carries home with her. A man don't carry no home. She carries a house with her, the family house. The house of all those who shall come forth, she carries that house. That's why we call it *"The Upper Room"*. You see, she is a protector because she is a house. She is that what we all are embraced with and by". (Forst, 1996)

A third woman carries a ladder-like structure that supports a growing vine. Above the vine, a boy and girl climb toward the future. These women, "carrying the weight of creation," stride confidently along the furrows of a plowed field (Wardlaw, 1995).

John Biggers, *The Upper Room*

Further interpretation is that the *The Upper Room*, in a cultural context, refers to women in African American communities who support and nurture the home and community while exhibiting timelessness and endurance. The themes of three powerfully built women with their backs to us in the foreground, two of whom are holding up a room that offers comfort and welcome and a third woman carrying a ladder of support, represent the strength of family and tradition in the rural culture.

The title, *The Upper Room,* comes from the Bible, and thus refers to the religious tradition of communion that these women uphold. The room that appears to be a sleeping room is a structure shaped rather like a simple rural church or school and represents the refuge they have traditionally offered. It is significant that the children are placed at the top of the "tree of life," which is supported by the third woman's hip. The large, rounded forms of the women suggest strength and stability, the fertility of earth mothers. The black cast-iron pots are traditional symbols of nurturing and womanhood in some African cultures (Getty, 1994).

Black women, particularly the mother and child, have always been central to Biggers' art. His works, such as *The Cradle* (1950), highlights the immense responsibility of motherhood. In this charcoal drawing, a weary and frustrated mother cradles her faceless children as though giving strength and support to their battle of life (Driskell, 1976). With her skinny, sketched arms and hands, she supports her head in much despair, yet she provides confront for her children.

John Biggers, *The Cradle*

Biggers paid homage to African art by integrating into his work many of the concepts of African tradition and philosophy. The African woman in Biggers' work came to represent the continuation of tradition in society. In Biggers' study of black women, he saw a symbol of cosmic energy, traditional knowledge, and creative power. Biggers saw the woman's body as a temple, and her child or children as the offspring of her energy and wisdom. He traced the sacred maternal figure to ancient Egypt, where the lap of Isis served as a throne for the young pharaohs. His mother figures represent the passing on of cultural knowledge through maternal wisdom (Wardlaw 1995).

In the painting *The Starry Crown* (1987), Biggers continued to explore and utilize cultural symbols. *Starry Crown*, the name of a traditional spiritual, also refers to the headdresses of the women, and as crowns of their cultural heritage. The three African American communities represent the three cultures of African antiquity: Egypt, Benin, and the Dogon. The crowns the women wear symbolize these civilizations, and together they create a cloth that is based on the sacred geometry that has brought order to each culture. The woman in the center represents the Dogon, the weaver of the "word." She sits with a string running through her teeth. This image symbolizes the transferal of

knowledge across generations and continents through the spoken word in their folk tales, proverbs and divine teachings (Wardlaw, 1995). As Wardlaw explains, "They are not simply making a quilt; they are creating a culture" (Wardlaw, p.58).

John Biggers, *Starry Crown*

The paintings and drawings of black women by Biggers have been analyzed and interpreted from varying perspectives. In an article published in The *Charlotte Observer,* by Alan Michael Parker (2002), entitled *Biggers Comes Home* (in reference to Biggers' 2002 exhibition in Gastonia, North Carolina), it states:

> An attitude of sorrow and introspection pervades many of Biggers' depictions of women here. The female figures in his drawings and prints are usually either presented seen from behind, or doing close work with small tools. The women who face the viewer are almost always looking down, away from eye contact and into the self or into history. There is a certain historical imperative implicit to this work; an idea of individual perseverance – even suffrage – in light of larger historical events. And yet, in these drawings and prints, the figure also always dominates pictorial space. The personal strength of these women (including three depictions of Bigger's mother) may be inferred. (p.10f)

Elizabeth Catlett

Elizabeth Catlett is another artist of the twentieth century who used positive images of black women. Catlett was a multi-faceted artist - a sculptor, printmaker, feminist, and social and political activist who dedicated her life to creating artwork that reflects her beliefs and experiences as an African American woman. She has devoted her career to exposing persecution and to commemorating the courage, endurance, and achievements of black women. Her work also communicates an emotional intensity and a deeply felt humanity that has guided every aspect of her life (Cleveland Art, 2002). Catlett produced works that underscore the tensions and racial divisions in America (Henderson, 1993). She sought to send a message in her sculptures and prints that is intended to awaken black people to their potential. She states, "Art for me must develop from a necessity within my people. It must answer a question, or wake up somebody or give a shove in the right direction – our liberation."(Lewis and Waddy, 1971) Certainly, her works with women as subjects send powerful messages. Works such as *Homage to My Young Black Sisters (1968), The Black Woman Speaks (1970), Share Cropper (1968) and Survivor (1978)* are among her most prominent works. These works symbolize voice, strength and courage in black women.

Catlett's sculptures are stylized with massive volumes and few precise shapes, and powerful expressions of physical vigor. Her art is expressed by her social viewpoint, and she often uses expressionistic and distorting techniques to make her point. An example of this technique is her sculpture, *Homage to My Young Black Sisters (1968).* The figure of a young woman is designed so that her right arm is raised and her face looks upward, creating a powerful thrust. This symbolic thrust and tilt of the head is

characteristic of Catlett's work, which is derived from her vision of the potential of black people. With an uplifted face and militant fist, this sculpture was carved in tribute to the courageous young women who fought for black voter registration and those who were participants in the civil rights movement in the South (Bearden and Henderson, 1993).

Elizabeth Catlett, *Homage to.My Young Black Sisters*

Catlett expresses in her art a strong message against oppression. *The Black Woman Speaks* (1970) is a tropical wood sculpture that has an opened mouth, with forceful eyes, and a forward look. These features symbolize a fearless and expressive voice against oppression, which is what Catlett has often represented in her work.

Elizabeth Catlett, *The Black Woman Speaks*

One of Catlett's most striking and popular linoleum prints is *The Sharecropper* (1968). It is a stalwart portrait of a black woman. This work is objective, while also both bold and massive in symbolizing strength. Yet, this print also evokes sympathy. Regenia A. Perry (1992), author of *Free Within Ourselves*, refers to this print as "the powerful, sculptural form of a strong, dignified African American woman".

Elizabeth Catlett, *Sharecropper*

The linocut, *Survivor* (1978), is another powerful image of black women by Catlett (Henderson, 1993). The name *Survivo*r itself interprets its symbolism because of the subject's "work worn" look, but the subject also exudes the perseverance and endurance to survive.

Elizabeth Catlett, *Survivor*

In Catlett's 1971 *Mother and Child*, the child is completely enfolded in the curving of the mother's torso and embracing arm. But knowing that children cannot be protected absolutely, the mother's other arm is raised, in similar fashion as her upturned face, in anguish. Her 1993 *Mother and Child* emphasizes the tender relationship between the two figures. The subject also illustrates intergenerational continuity; protective love that is simultaneously tender and fierce; and determination of strong women to hold their families together. (Cleveland Art, 2002). Catlett explains:

> "Black women have been cast in the role of carrying on the survival of black people through their positions as mothers and wives, protecting and educating and stimulating children and black men. We can learn from black women. They have had to struggle for centuries". (p.1)

Elizabeth Catlett, *Mother and Child* (1971

Elizabeth Catlett, *Mother and Child* (1993)

Charles White

Charles White is a well-renowned African American artist whose works portray heroism, tribulation, hopes, histories and strength of black people. White portrayed all of these special characteristics through artistic symbolism. The publication entitled *Charles White* (2002), by Andrea D. Barnwell, represents an extensive collection of his works, including those portraying images of black women.

Charles White, perhaps more than any other African American artist of the twentieth century, sought throughout his productive career to echo the sentiments and the beauty of the black race. According to Bearden and Henderson (1993):

> "White's meticulously rendered drawings and paintings, often affirming the humility and beauty of black people, moved many who had never previously recognized the aesthetic qualities of black figures and faces. In portraying black Americans, often in bitter circumstances, White sought to make a universal statement about mankind to be free of oppression". (p. 405)

White has been recognized by James A. Porter, the nation's most respected art historian, as one of the great voices among those black Americans who have been the real interpreters of the American Negro. Porter applauded White's consummate skill at representing aspects of black life in America. Porter noted that White, with uncompromising certainty, presented the beauty of a downtrodden people whose creative voice was all but unheard (Barnwell 2002).

White presented a revisionist interpretation of American history and culture that was centered on major figures in African American history. Among those celebrated in White's work were the female historical figures Sojourner Truth and Harriet Tubman. White depicted each of these two extraordinary women in compositions during his career. Nell Irvin Painter, Sojourner Truth's biographer, noted that although the two played very different roles in American history, people often confused them because they both lived in an era shadowed by bondage (Barnwell, 2002). Sojourner Truth became a dedicated orator who traveled throughout America advocating women's suffrage and abolition. Harriet Tubman was born into slavery, a generation after Sojourner Truth. Tubman led slaves from the South to freedom via the Underground Railroad to the North and to Canada. Truth and Tubman's roles were strikingly different. However, by depicting

them together in *General Moses and Sojourner* (1954), White captured their historic significance. In this charcoal drawing, Harriet Tubman (General Moses), stares directly at viewers, while Sojourner is rendered in profile. White emphasized their joint and enormous historical significance and paid tribute to them (Barnwell, 2002). The overlapping figures show their common characteristics and their contributions to the freedom and rights of their people.

Charles White, General Moses and Sojourner

White was particularly intrigued by Harriet Tubman. Her survival tactics, rebelliousness, and commitment to ushering other slaves into freedom inspired him. In the painting, *Five Great American Negroes* (1939-1940), Sojourner Truth, wearing her signature shawl and bonnet, is depicted as carrying out Tubman's historical role. White may have intended to render a composite of Truth and Tubman.

Charles White, *Five Great American Negroes*

Although White did paintings and drawings of Truth and Tubman together, he also rendered separate drawings of Tubman. The ink drawing *General Moses* (1965), (referring to Harriet Tubman and her role as a soldier in the Union army) depicts her seated on a rock formation, alert and prepared to respond to any eventuality. Tubman's oversized feet firmly planted on the ground correlate with those of the subject in the linocut *Solid as a Rock* (1958) to symbolize that she embodied strength (Barnwell, 2002).

Charles White, *General Moses*

During the 1950's, White's interest gradually shifted from leaders of the past to ordinary people. He began to devote a great deal of his work to portraits of black women. These sentimental portraits had a warm sensitivity, strength, and dignity. White demonstrated women as towering figures in African American life. He stated, "Women are the source of life.... I'm talking about the most fundamental of all of our sources. All of our energies come from our relationships with women" (Henderson, p. 417). The charcoal drawing, *Ye Shall Inherit the Earth* (1953), also known as *Guardian*, marked the development of White's heroic portrayals of ordinary black people (Bearden and Henderson, 1993). This drawing depicts a woman wearing a straw hat that shields her eyes from the sun. She passes down the beauty and responsibility of the land to the infant

in her arms. This drawing conveys the intimate intergenerational bonds that hold black people together and the ties they feel to the land they own and work (Barnwell 2000).

Charles White, *Ye Shall Inherit the Earth*

In some drawings, White uses cold weather to symbolize oppression. In the charcoal drawing, *J'Accuse, No. 1* (1966), he uses the title made famous by Emile Zola during the anti-Semitic Dreyfus case in France. He accuses American society of depriving and neglecting its African American citizens. In this case, he depicts a blind woman who lives in a cold white world. The figure is a seated black mother, wrapped in a blanket, with gloves and cap, whose solemnity symbolizes resistance, while lamenting the demand for human rights. In her dignity, she seems unperturbed, and she shows warmth by her inner spiritual strength (Bearden and Henderson. 1993).

Charles White, *J 'Accuse, No. 1*

The proud woman in the linocut *Solid as a Rock* (1958), exemplifies White's commitment to depicting anonymous people. These subjects represented symbols of strength and permanence for him. Barnwell (2002) writes:

> "With her erect stance and her large bare feet planted like roots in the soil, she is a metaphor for reliance on the land and black endurance, a symbol of understanding and balance. With White's reference to rock in the title, the texture and folds of her dress conjure images of rugged mountains. Her cropped hair, broad shoulders, and strong forearms give her characteristics more commonly associated with masculine strength, but her comportment and physical structure contrast beautifully with the way she gently raises her dress and provides a better view of her large feet. Like the Sojourner Truth figure in White's first public mural, *Five Great American Negroes*, the subject of Solid as a Rock is a composite figure who clearly signifies black people and their enduring strength". (Barnwell, p. 63)

Charles White, *Solid as a Rock*

White's pen and ink drawing, *Take My Mother Home* (1957), emphasizes the dignity and humanity of African Americans. This drawing focus on the plight of the elderly Americans who were often denied nursing home care (Henderson, 1993).

Charles White, *Take My Mother Home*

During the 1970's, White continually explored tonal relationships in his drawings and paintings. He revisited the multifaceted foreground and background relationships that he introduced in the *"Wanted"* series. While his work continued to address racial injustice, the subjects became more active and the backgrounds more symbolic. In the painting, *Children's Games No.1* (1975), children play, swing, and frolic while a nude woman labors in the foreground. Her very undernourished body contrasts with the color tones of the children's swaying clothes as they enjoy their horseplay. Alongside the playful children, "no exit" is stenciled in an abstract background. The face of another woman looms heavily in the background, intertwining the present with the recent past (Barnwell, 2002).

Charles White, *Children's Games #1* (1975)

In a 1950 exhibition, sponsored by the Committee for the Negro Arts (CNA), White devoted the show to the theme of black women. In his drawings and paintings, he had continually depicted black women as subjects who were a sustaining force in his life and work. White's drawings and paintings portrayed positive images of the sincerity and grace of these women. The painting, *Woman Worker* (1951), focused on a sincere stare, the hands, and the humble attire, which demonstrated White's commitment to the plight and liberation of black workers. Barnwell further states:

> "The exhibition garnered substantial critical attention. *The Daily Worker* emphasized the culture significance of White's work, pointing out that black women were typically represented as "bowing and scraping servants," "razor toting" girlfriends, forlorn superstitious figures, or light-skinned women who could pass for white. The article noted that White's images of dignified workers defied the representations that Americans were accustomed to seeing. Indeed, his works were incomparable for decades to come. *The Daily Worker* heralded White as one the nation's finest talents. *The New York Times* noted that Whites' work was infused with a "ringing sincerity" and that many paintings "suggest mural studies or allegorical intent in his expression of the hopes and aspirations of the Negro in America". (p.47)

Charles White, *Working Woman*

Faith Ringgold

Contemporary African American artist and author, Faith Ringgold, is best known for her painted story quilts. They include black female subjects and address feminist issues. These quilts offer a blend of personal memories of Faith Ringgold, historical facts, and social /political insight (Franklin, 1997). In *The John Hopskins News Letter*, Barbara Kiviat writes:

> "Whether Ringgold is exploring twentieth century art or the experiences of black America, whether a text flows across the work or the story is told exclusively in images, her quilts take the art of story telling and turn it on its side. Ingenuously, Riggold tells in great depth the tales of the black female experience, not in bound volumes, but rather on expansive murals. The result is as effective as it is novel. (Kiviat, p.2)

Ringgold's first quilt story was *Who's Afraid of Aunt Jemima* (1983). Aunt Jemima is depicted as a successful businesswoman, who reverses a negative African American stereotype of black women (Doyle, 2002). Malanie Franklin writes:

> *"Who's Afraid of Aunt Jemima?"* tells the family history of Jemima Blakery, a successful restaurant owner. The fictional Jemima was both a tribute to Ringgold's mother (also a successful business woman) and a fresh take on the Aunt Jemima stereotype; Ringgold believed that the image had positive aspects that had been overlooked because of its well known negative connotations". (p.5)

Franklin had a different, but positive perspective of the Aunt Jemima image. Ringgold resented the fact that Aunt Jemima was being presented as a stereotype image of a fat, black, sexually unappealing mammy. She reclaims this depiction through a rewriting of history as a positive image of a hero and role model. She explains that she is "tired of hearing black people speak negatively about the image of Aunt Jemima" and that she has admired "super-moms" like Aunt Jemimas for their "tireless devotion to nurturing".

Ringgold explains that it is very important to her as an artist to have positive visualizations of black people. She declares that fat is not ugly, nor is the black skin tone. Some people are fat and some are very dark, but someone decided that this was ugly. Equating blackness with ugly happened as a part of slavery. In the 1960's we were told to love our beautiful black selves. She further contends that women should be valued for their talents, which includes the genius of homemaker (Turner, 1999).

Faith Ringgold, *Who's Afraid of Aunt Jemima*

Who's Afraid of Aunt Jemima is created with narrative patterns that feature frontal views of female and male figures that are set within a quilted border. Delineations of

both black and white figures are meant to articulate diversity. By using the traditional quilting media that is associated with women, the artist hopes to tell a story of survival, pain, and success. The text story line communicates pride, heartbreak and courage. Some of the themes she states for this piece are stereotypes, oppression, femininity, sacrificial lamb, freedom, racism, role models, and super moms.

Liberation, freedom, and equality for blacks and women were a priority issue to Ringgold, and her *Women Over the Bridge* series is an example of how she chose to express her feeling about these issues. The Brooklyn Bridge image represents the masculine persona (its physical size and engineering prowess). The women images, however, are not contained by this notion of power. They take flight in the sky over the bridge, to freedom and self – realization (Doyle, 1999).

Faith Ringgold, *Women Over the Bridge* series

Because of Ringgold's involvement in the struggle for equality for women, her most profound artistic contribution has been in women's art. She states that her art is for

everyone, but it is about her (her sisters). In the *Aunts Edith and Bessie* (1974) in mixed media from her Family of Women series, Ringgold shapes soft pliable materials into life-sized human figures. This composition depicts two subjects with open mouths of which are intended to symbolize the need for women to speak out on their behalf.

Faith Ringgold, *Aunts Edith and Bessie*

Summary

Although there has been a long history of the use of negative symbolic images to portray black women, African American artists of the twentieth century have sought to change that trend. These artists have focused on positive characteristics, while promoting a sense of pride for black people. These artists chose to concentrate on the strength, beauty, courage, unperturbed dignity and heroism of black women. John Biggers' art represents the celebration of cultural heritage and pride of African Americans. He emphasized the contributions, strengths, and beauty of black women.

Charles White and Elizabeth Catlett regarded their work as an opportunity for social change and protest against injustices of black people. White's artistic approach to recapturing the history of black women expressed the heroic efforts of humankind to be free from oppression. With Catlett's work using black women as subjects, an art form that communicates directly to human needs and aspirations was created.

The art of Faith Ringgold took a different approach in expressing her personal perceptions and views of Aunt Jemima. Ringgold managed to turn what has been a demeaning image into a positive one. She used her art as a tool to convey a message of liberation and freedom for women and African Americans.

The foregoing review encompasses a broad spectrum of approaches to the issues of African American women and artistic symbolism, interpretations, representations and fields of experiences. The researchable literature will provide support and documentation on behalf of the researcher's contentions.

V. Research Orientation and Design of the Study

Methodology

In this research, I have analyzed of the works of four twentieth century African American artists. These featured artists are of both genders, and they used black women extensively as subjects in their artwork. This qualitative study has enabled me to research various interpretations of black women in African American art through symbolic imagery. Using the knowledge I gained, I will interpret the artists' artworks in the following section of this paper, which is labeled "Personal Analysis of Black Women in African American Art."

Information gathered in this research was obtained from personal interviews, video taped interviews, and extensive search of the literature. Personal interviews were conducted with Hazel Biggers, wife, and James Biggers, nephew, of the late artist John Biggers. I obtained authentic videotaped interviews with John Biggers, Faith Ringgold, and Elizabeth Catlett. I transposed these interviews to a hard copy and selected pertinent information for this research.

A primary focus of this study was to investigate how various African American artists have used symbolic imagery in depicting African American women. In doing so, this researcher performed a qualitative comparison that represented artistic style, design, and ideology of the designated African American artists. The data was analyzed and then served as a foundation for my personal interpretations of the African American women portrayed in African American art by selected modern and post-modern artists.

Personal Analysis of Black Women in African American Art

As a result of this study, I have become knowledgeable about how black women have been portrayed symbolically in African American Art. I have determined that cultural heritage and historical experience have played a major role in how they are depicted. Because of the experiences of black women and their negative portrayal, many black artists of the twentieth century sought to change the often-negative images of black women to a positive one. Overwhelmingly, black women are portrayed as positive, strong, courageous, and proud individuals in contemporary African American art depictions. The image of black women is also sometimes used in social and political protests against racial and gender injustice. Many twentieth century African American artists, as discussed in the literature review, have succeeded in changing the symbolic image of black women in African American art.

As an additional result of this study, I have taken a more interpretive and comparative look at the symbolic image of black women in African American Art. In the next section, I will provide personal interpretations and also compare portrayals of black women in other works of various African American artists.

Betye Saar (1926-)

The works of contemporary artist Betye Saar are probably the most interesting and unusual ones in which symbolic images of black women are used. At first glimpse, one would wonder why a black female artist would portray such a negative image of black women. However, after I researched her background and political views, her work takes on a whole new interpretation.

Saar, born in Pasadena, California, came from a diverse heritage, including African American, Native American, German, Scottish, and Creole. She grew up near Watts and was influenced by Siman Rodia, an Italian immigrant who incorporated scraps of found glass and metal into building the famous Watts Towers. She feels that her memory of their construction contributed greatly to her artistic expression. However, earlier in her career, Saar's style included occult imagery because of her mother's interests in voodoo and clairvoyants. During the late 1960's, her themes changed to those of spirituality and growth. She brings together objects to make a political statement or one of spirituality. Saar, having a diverse cultural background, attempts to show similarities across cultures and dismiss stereotypes (Guisiger, p.2).

An analysis of Sarrs' depiction of black women invites a compelling comparison with the works of others who have used the same subject matter. The Aunt Jemima image is an appropriate example. Sarr, like Faith Ringgold, used a very different approach to combat negative images of black women. Although their approach differed in style and meaning from that of Biggers, White, and Catlett, Ringgold and Saar also differed. Ringgold, in her *Who's Afraid of Aunt Jemima* and her *Two Aunt Jeminas* story quilts, uses what was considered by others to be a demeaning image of black women and

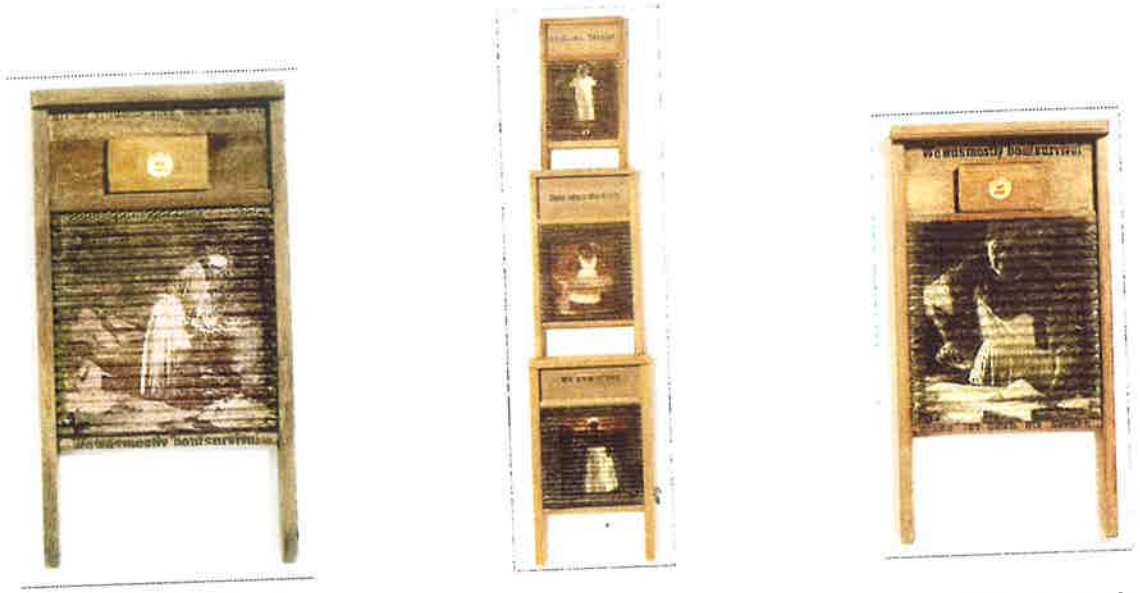
portrays it in a positive manner. Saar used an unusual technique as a means of exposing racism. As a part of her composition, she repeatedly used negative stereotypes of commercial images of blacks to demonstrate the harsh realities of such negative depictions. She redefined negative commercial images of blacks by altering them into images of power. Saar made sculptures by assembling objects and images to express her intense feelings about racial stereotypes. In 1972, she created *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima* to subvert the black mammy stereotype of the black American woman. The image can be described as a heavy, black-skinned, and maternal figure with a smiling demeanor who appears to be content as a servant (Patton, 2001). This collage, known as an *assemblage* (a three dimensional collage created from a group of everyday objects), contains a nesting of pictures and objects that are commercial images of Aunt Jemima. In front of the images is a "mammy doll" that is somewhat alarming, large of girth and very black. The figure has a broom in one hand and a rifle in the other hand. Behind the innocent smile, lies a defensive "I dare you to mess with me" image or "See me as you wish, I know who I am". The rifle represents defensiveness, and liberation. Although this different Aunt Jemima stands assertively, while holding a crying child on one hip and a broom in the other hand. One could conclude that her intentions were not of servitude. She stands behind a picket fence with a white sheet draped over it. The sheet has negative associations (Ku Klux Klan), and is almost overshadowed by a large raised black fist. This gesture of the raised fist represents black power. Perhaps an interpretation of this composition is that it was a warning that such portrayals of black women could erupt in violence. Saar converts the negative image of Aunt Jemima to an assertive image of power. She was addressing and confronting stereotypes and identity

by breaking patterns set by traditions and social norms. As Faith Ringgold did in her *Two Aunt Jemimas*, she accomplished this by using a technique similar to that of Andy Warhol's repeated images. She repeated the stereotype, the nesting of commercial images in the background of Aunt Jemima, in order to obliterate itself and the prejudice with which it is associated (Guisinger, 2001).

Betye Saar, *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima*

Saars is also known for a series she produced on vintage washboards. This series of washboards were mixed-media assemblages that consisted of the washboard itself. The washboard series have been collaged with "Black Collectibles". They presented demeaning images of slave-era black women being often sold to tourists in the southern areas of the United States. The vintage washboards were entitled: *All My Troubles Lord, Soon Be Over; Lest We Forget, Upon Who's Shoulder We Stand;* and *We Was Mostly 'bout Survival.* They were all text messages from spirituals, advertisements, historic documents, or from the artist herself. Saar uses the corrugated metal washing area as a window or frame in which to display photographs that commemorate the labors, sacrifices, and strength of black women. The figures in the art works emphasize the toil,

hardship, and endurance of black women. The text messages on these washboards often provide subtle and ironic commentaries imprinted over images of excessive labor and brutality. These images of brutality ask viewers to remember and honor the work that laid the foundations of the present day. (Rosenfield, 2001)



Elizabeth Saar, *All My Troubles Lord, Soon Be Over; Upon Who's Shoulder We Stand; and We Was Mostly 'bout Survival*

Jeff Donaldson (1932-)

Jeff Donaldson is another African American artist who use the black female image to make political and cultural statements. Donaldson, printmaker, painter, and educator, was born in Pine Bluff, Arkansas. He co-founded, with Wadsworth Jarrell and Barbara Jones-Hughes, the African Commune of Bad Relevant Artists, originally the Coalition of Black Revolutionary Artists (Afri-COBRA). The group's objectives were to develop a new African American aesthetic and commit to the principles of social responsibility to the community and to the artists, and to the promotion of pride in black self-identity (Powell, 1996).

Donaldson, as Sarr and Ringgold did, used the Aunt Jemima image to convey a protest racism and injustice against African American women. The Aunt Jemima image in his painting, *Aunt Jemima and the Pillsbury Doughboy* (1963), suggests a special interpretation. At a time when racial clashes were prevalent, Donaldson's artistic response makes the African American struggle for civil rights a key component of Pop Art as it illustrates American culture. As it may appear, the painting does not necessarily illustrate an actual racial confrontation between a policeman and civil rights demonstrator as was common during that time. The Aunt Jemima image is used as a symbol of the African American struggle for civil rights. Aunt Jemima is depicted as a self-defensive, strong symbol for the integrity of her race. The painting shows her efforts to protect herself from the blows of the club of the "Pillsbury Doughboy" (white policeman). She is depicted as being trapped, but struggling between the policeman and the swastika-like American flag. Her muscular statuesque figure signifies her strength in the contest against her oppressor. Her stance and facial expression denotes her determination and suggests that she will not give in to defeat. In this painting Aunt Jemima symbolizes black America's strength to overcome racism and oppression. The interpretation of this piece may also suggest that Donaldson's intent was to undermine the submissiveness and passiveness that is associated with black women. However, Donaldson also emphasizes the serious impact of racism and violence on African American citizens.

Jeff Donaldson, *Aunt Jemima and the Pillsbury Doughboy*

Another interesting and very different work by Donald is his painting entitled *JamPact/JelliTtite* (1988) which pays homage to his daughter, Jamila. The piece also owes its colorful symmetrical composition to the African American classical music of Jazz. Music plays a prominent role in West Africa and African American culture, which serves as Donaldson's philosophy for art making. This piece is symmetrically arranged with fragmented aspects of jazz musicians, such as expressive singing mouths (both women and men), hands playing musical instruments, and geometric shapes. This painting makes reference to the way some jazz musicians composed their work and is "jam-packed" with meaning, variety, color, and symbols.

William Pajaud (1925-)

Contemporary artist, William Pajaud, is an excellent example of black artists who demonstrated cultural influences in his work. He was born and raised in New Orleans and his ethic background serves as root sources of his work. A great portion of Pajaud's work covers topics and themes such as New Orleans Jazz Funerals and landscapes of Thailand. He states that his primary need is to show his gut reaction to man's coping with the cycles of life and death. He further explains that he has always painted black themes even without realizing it because those are his experiences (Hanks, 2000).

One of the subjects that Pajaud often paints is the black woman. He contends that black women have been essential to the race from the times of slavery to the present, and he admires their timeless beauty. He clarifies this by stating that he is not referring to the outward physical appearance, but the beauty that comes from the people who have kept the black community on course since the time of slavery (Hanks, 2000).

An example of this beauty can be found in the pastel drawing, *Swamp Woman* (1992). This painting also represents the culture of some New Orleans women who live along the bayou. The woman in this painting is a large round figure who sits preparing a meal of shrimp, perhaps for her family. Her enormous size, what may appear to be an unattractive focal point of the picture, apparently carries a more significant meaning. As with the women in John Biggers' painting *The Upper Room*, her rounded frame indicates the strength and capacity to carry the huge responsibilities she holds as the caregiver of the home.

William Pajaud, *Swamp Woman*

Pajaud's oil painting, *Solid as a Rock* (1971), depicts a black woman who stands firmly with her arms folded looking directly at the viewer. Her physical stance portrays steadfastness, strength, and endurance. Unlike the bandana worn by the Aunt Jemima image, she wears a simple but stylish head wrap that exemplifies the fashion of her African American culture. Her Afro-like buns further accentuate her ethnicity. In comparison to Charles White's linocut *Solid as a Rock*, Pajaud employs a more expressionistic style of toward the subject. While the techniques and styles differ greatly, their symbolic meanings are the same.

William Pajaud, *Solid as a Rock*

Pajaud's painting, *Church Sister* (1992), also illustrates his experience and observation of the culture of black women and their church apparel. He recalls his mother always wearing beautiful hats to church. In this painting, a woman wears a colorful hat and is dressed for church. The *Church Sister* not only shows the culture of black women, it also represents the good that exists in human nature. This painting represents a combination of strong religious customs and a pride in her physical attractiveness.

William Pajaud, *Church Sister*

In contrast to the *Church Sister*, the painting the *New Concubine (*1993) shows Pajaud's effort to portray the evil that lies within human nature. In this colorful expressionistic, yet somewhat abstract composition, are several nude women and one woman that is partially nude. The partially nude woman is the new concubine. A fairly

large man awaits her as she is prepared to become one of his possessions. Pajaud purposed to show that not all women are pure and unblemished.

William Pajaud, *New Concubine*

Sargent Claude Johnson (1887-1967)

Sargent Claude Johnson, sculptor, was well known for his depiction of natural beauty and his dignified portrayal of African Americans. Johnson was born in Boston, Massachusetts in 1887. At an early age, Johnson and his siblings became orphans and lived temporarily with their uncle and aunt. His aunt, May Howard Jackson, a sculptor of status, guided his first efforts of clay modeling. Johnson became one of the leading sculptors during the Harlem Renaissance era. During this period, Johnson's work projected African culture and racial pride. He produced strictly a Negro Art, not the culturally mixed Negro of the city but a more primitive slave type as existed in this country during the period of slave import (Bearden, 1993).

Sargent Claude Johnson's work focused on black prototypes, usually dark in color as a means of heightening racial characteristics. Through his sculptures of black women, he emphasized the characteristics of the lips, hair, and skin tone. Emphasizing these characteristics was done to show the beauty of the black race and to promote self-pride of African Americans. His sculptures of black women almost always looked upward to convey a message of hope and pride.

Johnson's *Negro Woman* (1933) is portrayed as the black female that is modern, natural, and devoted. Her open mouth and forward upward tilt of the head suggests that she is not afraid to speak out. The simply sculpted folded hands are a symbol of calmness, yet her posture suggests that she is very confident. The white or light colored dress serves to symbolize her purity and honesty that is within.

Sargent Claude Johnson, *Negro Woman*

Because Johnson was orphaned at the age of fifteen, his protective mother figures may have reflected his need of warmth and security during his youth. He spent a great deal of his earlier life in foster care. After leaving relatives, eventually he and his siblings were sent to separate foster homes. Johnson's *Forever Free* (1935) is an impressive sculpture of a mother and two children who are incised into the lower portion of her tubular form. This arrangement of figures makes the mother figure a symbol of protection and security. The concept of the image of the children being carved into the mother's form and not sculpted separately represents the family's inseparable union. Johnson shows a connection with Elizabeth Catletts' *Mother and Child, No.2,* which also symbolizes protection. However the mother figure in Catlett's sculpture realizes that protection is not absolute. As with Catletts' sculptures of women, Johnson gives the head of the mother figure an upward tilt with eyes looking forward to portray the qualities of confidence, dignity, strength and hope.

Sargent Claude Johnson, *Forever Free*

Artis Lane (1927)

Artis Lane is another outstanding artist who has devoted her talents to expressing the concerns of women who have felt the bondage of oppression and to the heroism of those who fought for civil rights. Lane, an African American sculptor, painter, and printmaker, was born in Buxton, Ontario Canada in 1927. From the age six Lane has been sculpting and capturing the spirit of the images and unfolding life. A descendent of abolitionist educator and publisher, Mary Ann Shadd, Lane is an advocate for freeing the human spirit (Hearne, 2003).

Lane's sculptures are symbolic of the contemporary woman's fragmented state of being. Her favorite theme for her sculptures is that of the emerging woman. They are based mainly on women in motion searching for opportunities and independence (Lewis, 1990). Her sculpture *Release* (1982) depicts a nude woman who stands with outstretched arms as if to prepare to fly. A nude male figure that stands behind her releases her to flight or to freedom. Her stance is firm and secure, as she appears confident to stand on her "own two feet." The outstretched horizontal arms, as with Faith Ringgold's *Women Over the Bridge Series*, symbolizes her preparation for flight to freedom. Emerging to freedom and independence from male dominance appears to be an important symbolic message.

Artis Lane, *Release*

Lane's series of emerging women exemplifies her effort to show the contemporary woman becoming a new, independent, self-relying, liberated woman. An example of Lane's attempt to show this "new birth" or new emergence is seen in her sculpture *New Waiting,* a standing woman with her hands on her hip. Her technique of leaving bits and pieces of the ceramic casting material on various parts of the body symbolizes that the woman is not yet complete, but still emerging. This is done to demonstrate the continued spiritual voyage and change that one must undertake in order to become a whole person. Although Lane's nude figures in her sculptures such as *Release* may imply the sensual aspect of human nature, their complete nudeness suggests Lanes desire to emphasize women's complete freedom.

Another work by Lane is a sculpture of Rosa Park, the mother of the Civil Rights movement, located in the Rosa Parks Library and Museum. The sculpture is simple, yet her disposition leaves a profound impression of sturdiness and determination on its viewer. The simplicity may imply that she was a self-effacing, simple, workingwoman while her disposition may imply her strength during the struggle for equal rights. This sculpture of Rosa Park is another example of a tribute to the heroism of black women in their fight for racial and gender equality.

Eldzier Cortor (1916)

Eldzier Cortor was best known for his unique way of depicting the beauty of black women, their poverty and ethnicity. Not necessary having lived in poverty, but having seen it, Cortorr's artistic expression paints the hard truth about black women living in a deprived society. Cortor was born in Richmond, Virginia. In order to avoid the racism that existed in Richmond, the family moved to Chicago when he was about one year old. Originally Cortor's ambition was to become a cartoon artist, which arose from his study of black cartoon strips. However, his art history teacher, Kathlean Blackshear, who had the biggest influence on his life as an artist, helped to change his focus from cartoons to painting. Her introduction of African sculpture initiated his career as a fine arts painter. Blackshear also helped him to qualify for employment with WPA Arts project. Here he met George Neal who organized a group of African Americans, including himself, who were urged to go into the streets of Chicago's South Side to paint the daily lives of the people there. During this period he met the dancer Katherine Dunham, who encouraged him to focus on the beauty and grace of dance (Henderson, 1993).

Cortor later began to work on studies of tall, nude black women. In these studies, one could appreciate the influence of African sculpture because of the elongated figure and cylindrical forms. Their faces also possessed African characteristics, having dark complexions and dominant facial features. Cortor is one of the few artists who painted the black female in the style of European Masters. An initial interpretation of his work of nude black women might be the seductiveness or sensuality of black women. However, to Cortor, the black woman represents the black race and the continuance of life (Patton,

1998). He is also one of the first artists to emphasize the beauty of black women in portraits and figure studies (Henderson, 1993). His elongated images of black women not only emphasize their beauty, but also play up their gracefulness. His painting *Room No. 5 (1948),* depicts the reflection of a woman who sits in front of a mirror in deep thought. Her pose gives a feeling of detachment and loneliness.

Eldzier Cortor, *Room No. 5*

Cortor often placed his figures in a deprived environment to symbolize those blacks that are often deprived, yet who accepted and learned to live with their condition. Also, he may have wanted to suggest that beauty is sometimes not appreciated because of circumstances and surroundings.

Another example of this is Cortor's painting *Americana* (1946) which depicts the beauty of a black woman in contrast with her impoverished home. The peeling wall pasted with a collage of magazine clippings shows a picture of South Africa's Boer leader, General Jan Smuts, who denied black Africans their rights in South African government. This backdrop serves as a reminder of promised freedoms and the deprivation that yet exists among some blacks in America. Although impoverished, this statuesque African American woman steps gracefully from her bath, symbolizing pride and beauty.

Eldzier Cortor, *Americana*

Cortor created several dance compositions illustrating grace, rhythm, and the cultural attire of black women. In many of his compositions, such as *Dance Composition No. 8* (1970) and *Dance Composition No. 35* (1981), elongated figures wear traditional head wraps. The head wraps are also worn in his series of classical head studies. The images in these studies, though solemn, are powerful and sensual. His studies of African American women helped to redefine black femininity and beauty.

Summary

The history of black women in America invites an examination of at their representation in African American art. The symbolic imagery of black women in visual art has yet to be realized and fully appreciated. This research study was designed to provide an interpretative and an investigator's analysis of the symbolic imagery of black women in African American art. The research problem stated that historically, stereotyped depictions of African American women in art suggested that African American women lacked physical grace, charm and beauty and related feminine characteristics. The question for research investigation was: How have African American artists Betye Saar, Jeff Donaldson, William Pajoud, Sargent Claude Johnson, Artis Lane, and Eldzier Cortor incorporated imagery of African American women in their work? The research was conducted through personal and taped interviews, extended literature reviews, audio/video reviews, historical researches and personal analysis of

African American art-works. The findings of this study include the following: African American artists depict African American women as (1) a source of courage and strength, (2) people who have a significant social relevance and status, and (3) a symbol of beauty and grace.

VI. Conclusion

There are numerous African American artists who exhibit a passion for reproducing creativity and beauty in their work. The key idea to be drawn from this study is that symbolic imagery used by African American artists not only focus on physical features, but also speak to the character and social relevance of black women.

My research reveals that African American artists have long sought to portray black women through action, emotions, and character presentation. With the obvious exception of stereotypes, the depictions of the African American woman in African American Art have helped to provide a true appreciation for African American culture, experiences, and history.

VII. Discussion and Implications

In today's sophisticated and high-tech society full of imagery and style, artists have the ability to influence appearances, opinions and perceptions. However, often such advancements are used to perpetuate negative stereotypes and misconceptions. In the case of African American women who are portrayed in art, commercial advertising and the big screen, some depictions have been deplorable and misrepresented. This researcher, along with educators and image-makers, must accept responsibility for calling attention to this issue and initiating corrective measures. Through my study of negative

imagery of African American women in art, my expectation is to disseminate a true and realistic perception of African American women.

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Forest, Barbara. *John Biggers Journeys* (Chloe Productions, 1996)

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Suggested Readings

Cambell, Driskell Lewis and Ryan (1987), *Harlem Renaissance: Art of Black America.* Harlem, New York: Henry Adams Publishers, Inc.

The authors do an excellent job in portraying America's great black cultural awakening in the arts. The Harlem Renaissance, the name given to this period of fertile creativity, left a rich cultural legacy. The book explores the visual aspects of that legacy, taking a comprehensive look at the compelling images of this era through a hundred and fifty works of a small, yet representative group of painters, sculptors and photographers.

Driskell David C., (1976). *Two Centuries of Black American Art.* New York: New York Museum of Art

This book gives an example of the African American experience through art. It discusses black artists and artisans in the formative years between 1750-1920, and the evolution of a Black aesthetic during the period of 1920-1950.

Henderson, Harry and Bearden, Romare (1993) *The History of African American Artists.* New York: Pantheon Books

Karenga's, Maulana (2000) *Introduction to Black Studies.* Los Angeles: The University of Sancore Press

This publication provides a comprehensive discourse on the role of the African American woman and her role in the community and society.

This an excellent publication that explores the very early 1920's and the Black Renaissance, the emergence of African American artists during the Depression, self-taught artists, and post-World War II black artists.

Lewis, Samella and Waddy, Ruth (1971). *Black Artist On Art*. Contemporary Crafts Inc.

This book devotes special attention to many artists who were deeply concerned with the concept of cultural identity and naturalism. This volume touches the concept of a global Black community with a common vision and concern for life.

Sterling, Dorothy (1988). *Black Foremothers*. New York: The feminist Press at the City University of New York

Sterling writes that the history of black women has been neglected because they are members of two social groups—women and Blacks—who traditionally have been ignored by historians. This book chronicles the lives of three extraordinary black women—Ida B. Wells, Ellen Craft and Mary Church Terell.