

An Essential Presence

THE PETRUCCI FAMILY FOUNDATION
COLLECTION OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN ART

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All photos courtesy of the Petrucci Family Foundation Collection of African-American Art.

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ALLENTOWN
ART MUSEUM

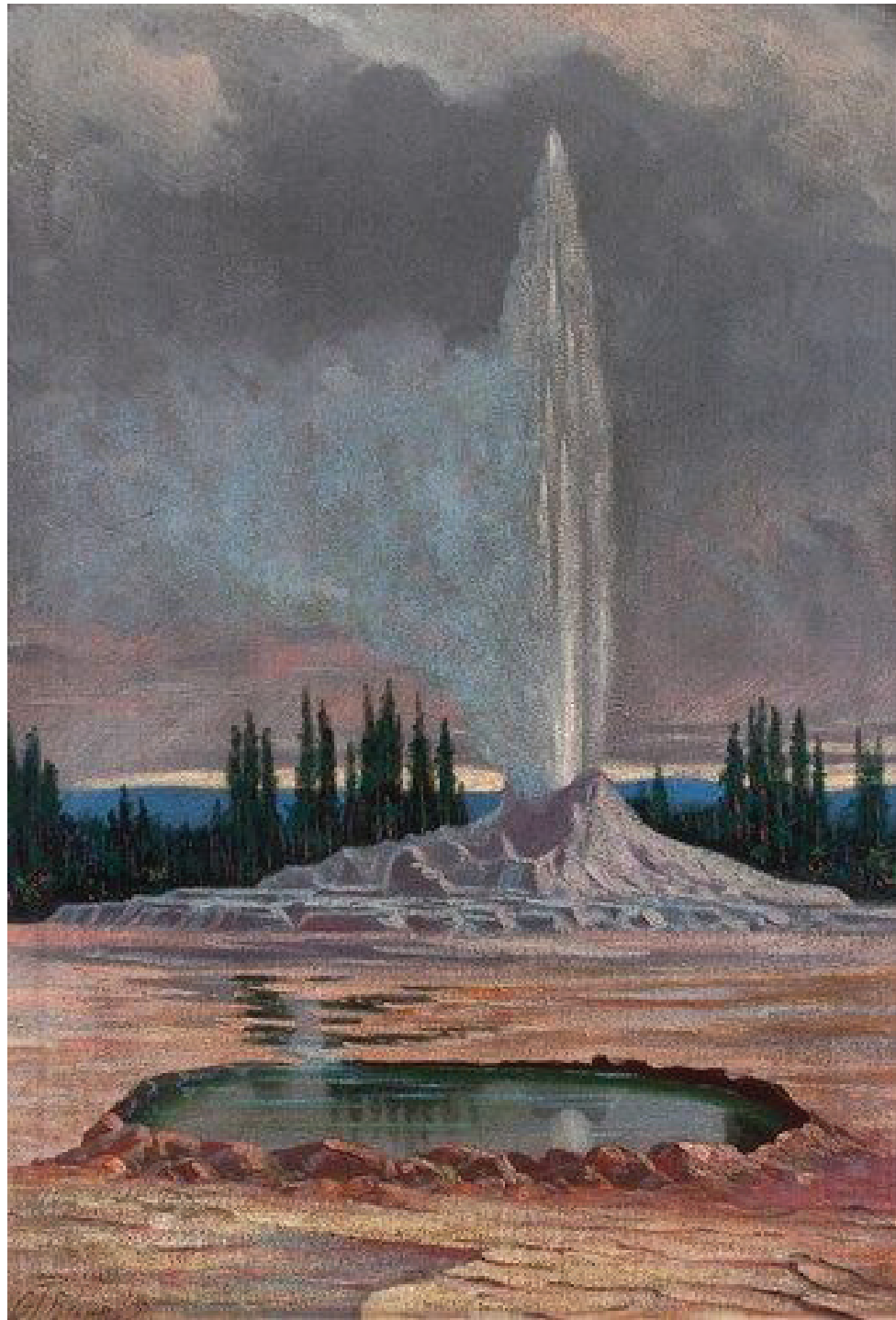
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cover: Al Loving (1935–2006), *Home*, 2003, acrylic on rag paper mounted on Plexiglas.
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Grafton Tyler Brown (1841–1914), *Castle Geyser, Yellowstone National Park*, 1891, oil on canvas laid on board. © Estate of Grafton Tyler Brown

REFLECTING upon the lack of attention directed to African-American artists, the painter Aaron Douglas asked, “What kind of picture, what kind of world does a black artist see?” In diverse and nuanced ways, the Petrucci Family Foundation Collection of African-American Art answers these questions. Assembled by Lehigh University art professor **Berrisford Boothe**, the Petrucci Family Foundation Collection explores the African-American experience from the nineteenth century to the present day. Shaped by the artistic vision of Boothe over a remarkably short time period, this collection retains a clear mission, according to the curator, “to foster cross-cultural understanding and reconciliation.”

The earliest works in the exhibition are turn-of-the-twentieth-century paintings by **Grafton Tyler Brown** and **Henry Ossawa Tanner**, artists born in Pennsylvania who pursued opportunities in the American West and Europe, respectively, and shared an artistic process rooted in direct observation. Brown learned lithography in Philadelphia before moving to California, operating a successful print studio and painting landscapes of the national parks. Tanner focused on the human figure, creating religious work that earned medals at the Paris Salon as well as genre scenes of African-American life. His representations of the New Testament, including several depictions of Nicodemus, were informed by his father’s service in the African Methodist Episcopal Church as well as travels throughout the Holy Land.

Echoes of Harlem

Harlem became the center of African-American culture during the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s, a concerted, collective effort to redefine race through excellence in the arts. **James Van Der Zee** established the preeminent photography studio of the time, capturing the significant events and inhabitants of the neighborhood, including his own family.

The Van Der Zee Men, 1908, conveys the family's aspirations through their multigenerational

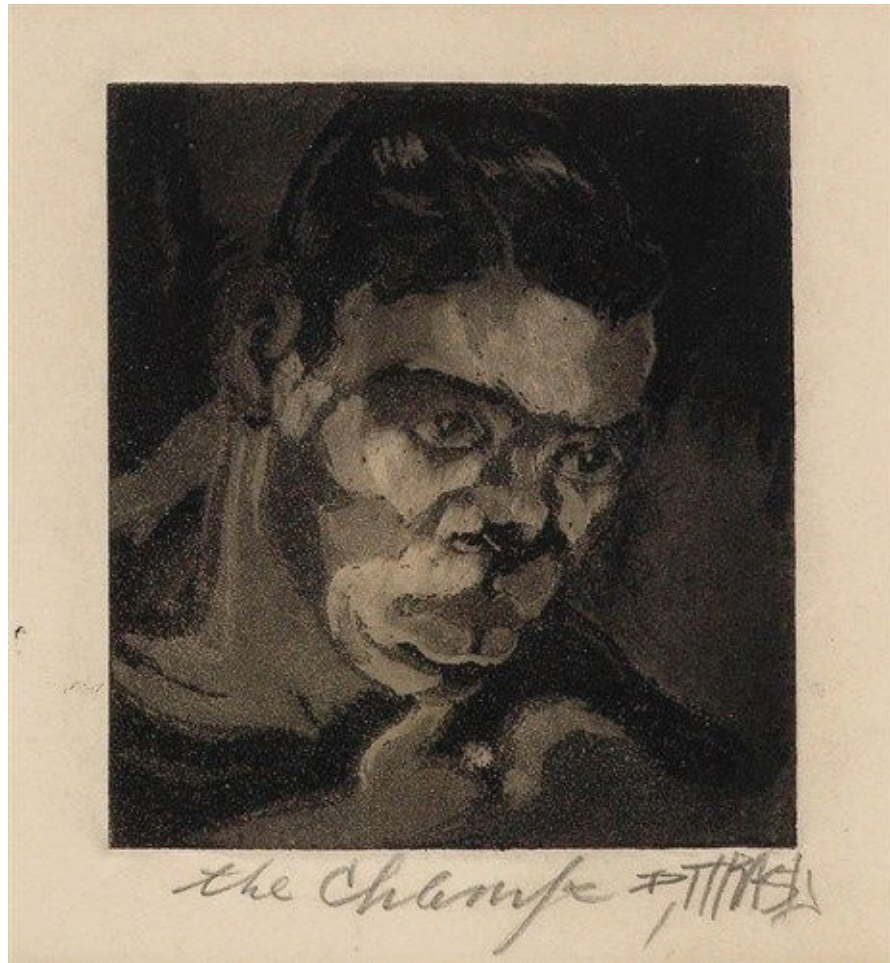


James Van Der Zee (1886–1983), *The Van Der Zee Men*, 1908, gelatin silver print, 41/75. © James Van Der Zee

bonds and formal attire, one of many positive images of African Americans that inspired future generations. Initiatives including the Harlem Community Art Center further spread the corrective power of art, with **Jacob Lawrence** studying there before painting significant figures in African-American history. His *Confrontation at the Bridge*, 1975, depicts the 1965 civil rights march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama, in his colorful and direct narrative style. Similarly, **Elizabeth Catlett** studied with some of the major figures from the Harlem Renaissance at Howard University. An accomplished sculptor and printmaker, she explored the dignity of the black figure and often focused on women such as dancer, stage actress, professor, and activist Glory Van Scott, the subject of the bronze bust *Glory*, 1981. As in her seminal print *The Sharecropper*, 1952, which is in the Allentown Art Museum's collection, Catlett represents the strength and beauty of women through her heroine's determined gaze and prominent features.



Jacob Lawrence (1917–2000), *Confrontation at the Bridge*, 1975, screen print. © Estate of Jacob Lawrence



Like Lawrence, Catlett, and many other African-American artists, **Dox Thrash** found employment through the Federal Art Project of the Depression-era Works Progress Administration, working at the Philadelphia Fine Prints Workshop. A pioneer of carborundum printmaking, Thrash was celebrated for his representations of black life, ranging from athletes to the working class, and he shared in the belief that cultural achievement could alter perceptions of race in America. **Robert Blackburn**, another accomplished printmaker, studied at the Harlem Community Art Center and Atelier 17 before opening the Printmaking Workshop, one of America's premier print studios.

Dox Thrash (1893–1965), *The Champ*, ca. 1930, aquatint. © Estate of Dox Thrash

Blackburn demonstrated remarkable talent by the age of seventeen when he made *Refugees* (*People in a Boat*), ca. 1938, a lithograph historian Sharon Patton terms a metaphor for lack of opportunities available to African Americans prior to World War II. **Curlee Holton** continued the legacy of Thrash and Blackburn with the founding of the Experimental Printmaking Institute at Lafayette College and Raven Fine Art Editions, as he collaborated with **Faith Ringgold**, **Willie Cole**, and **Boothe** on portfolios represented in the Petrucci Family Foundation Collection and the collection of the Allentown Art Museum.



Robert Blackburn (1920–2003), *Refugees* (*People in a Boat*), ca. 1938, lithograph. © Estate of Robert Blackburn

Beyond Spiral: Contemporary Trends

In 1963 a group of African-American artists gathered at **Romare Bearden**'s studio in New York to discuss the challenges of being a black artist during the civil rights era. Adopting the name "Spiral" to evoke continuous evolution, the artists held only one group exhibition but their debates about social commitment in the arts remain timely. Bearden himself recast the African-American subject in art, whether in scenes of daily life in Harlem, the American South, and the Caribbean or through characters from Homer's *Odyssey*, representing the complexity of the black experience in his painting and collage work.

The paintings of another member of Spiral, **Norman Lewis**, feature improvised gestures and syncopated rhythms akin to jazz music, absorbing the aesthetics of abstraction



Norman Lewis (1909–1979), *Untitled Abstract Composition*, 1953–1955, ink on paper. © Estate of Norman Lewis



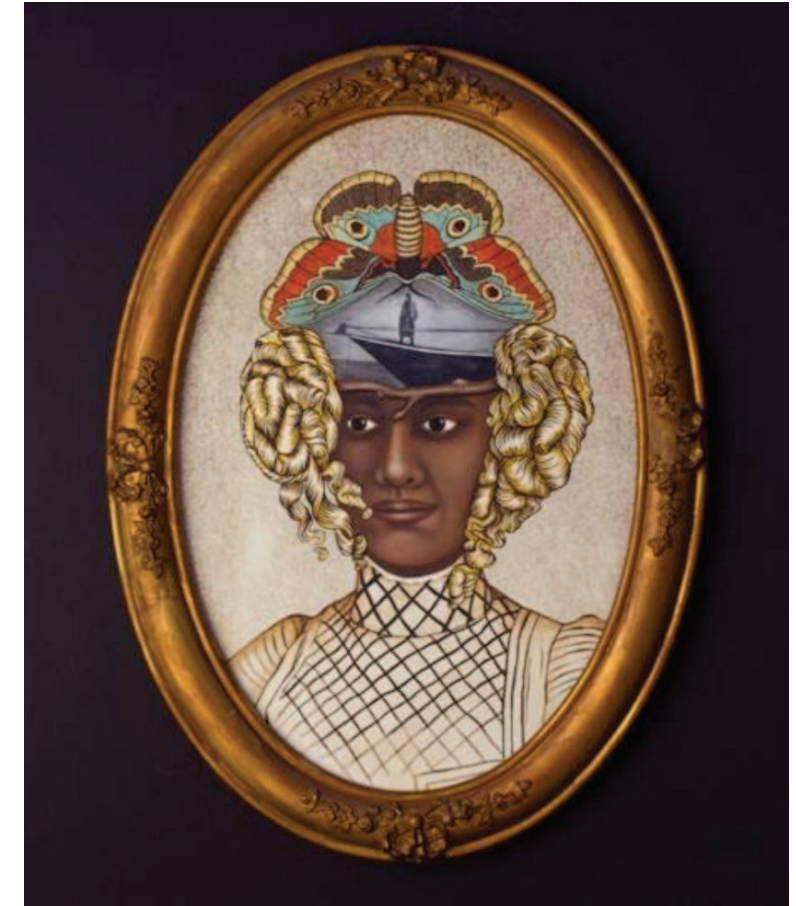
prominent in New York at midcentury. Lewis and his contemporary **Hale Woodruff** believed they should engage philosophic and formal concerns rather than directly represent social issues. Although a realist early in his career, Woodruff's later work, including *Cow Woman*, 1970–77, emphasized graceful, cubist forms. These artworks anticipate the geometric jazz-influenced paintings of **Al Loving** and the gestural color field works of **Sam Gilliam**, artists who rose to prominence in the late 1960s with their innovative approaches to abstraction: Loving's dynamic optical illusionism and Gilliam's draped, stained canvases.

Sam Gilliam (b. 1933), *Transfer #2*, 2009, acrylic with collage. © Sam Gilliam



A prominent trend throughout African-American art history is the retention of African traditions, as many artists studied precolonial Africa to reconnect with the rich cultures upended by slavery. Through accomplished draftsmanship, **Herman “Kofi” Bailey** and **Charles White** capture the traditional attire and dances of the Yoruba and other peoples of West Africa. Some, such as **Willie Cole** and **Vanessa German**, explore religious belief and mythology through references to Yoruba gods and *nkisi* figures, respectively. **Alison Saar** further draws upon the fusion of cultural practices that characterizes the African diaspora, often depicting the syncretic symbolism of Christianity and Vodoun through a feminist lens.

Herman “Kofi” Bailey (1931–1981), *Young Woman from Yoruba*, 1970–1975, charcoal, graphite, and chalk on paper. © Herman Bailey



Like her mother, Betye, and sister Alison, **Lezley Saar** explores the ambiguities of identity through mixed-media constructions. Her interest in nineteenth-century literature informs many of these creations, as she applies a neo-Gothic sensibility to reflect on, in her words, “hybridity, acceptance, and belonging.” While Alison and Lezley Saar often ground their work in histories of syncretism, **Carrie Mae Weems** and **Lorna Simpson** first achieved success in the 1990s for depicting the experiences of African-American women in contemporary society. Both extensively employ photography, with Weems staging narratives about female enculturation and Simpson utilizing text and fragmented images to offer commentary on racial and gender fetishism.

Lezley Saar (b. 1953), *I felt in love with this piece of you*, 2017, acrylic on fabric over wood panel and antique frame with glass. © Lezley Saar



William Villalongo (b. 1975), *Corner Office*, 2017, acrylic, paper, collage and velvet flocking on wood panel. © William Villalongo

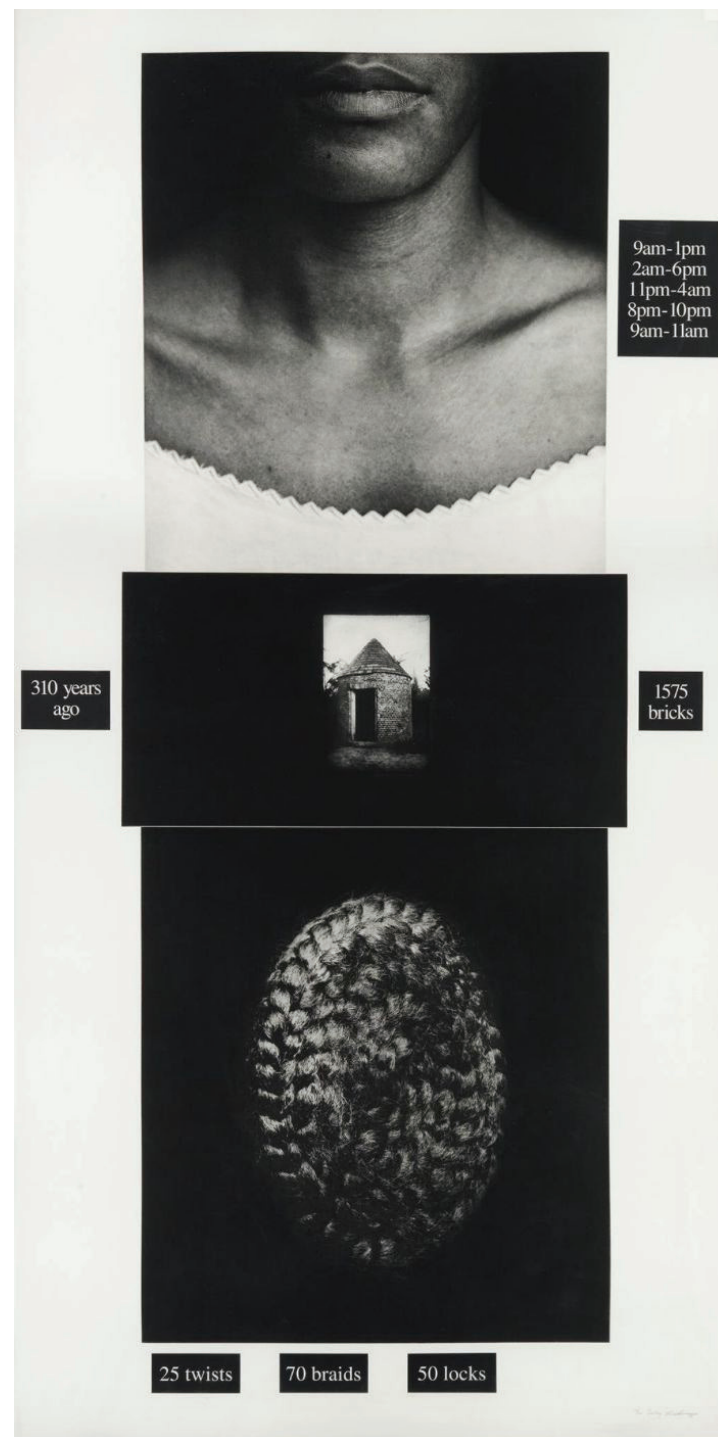
The symbolic potential of the human figure continues to feature prominently in contemporary art, ranging from the unsettling images of **Kara Walker** to **Sterling Shaw**'s powerful nudes. The paintings and collages of Haitian American **Florine Demosthene** feature beguiling forms that are beautiful yet unresolved, with dark voids and incomplete features obscuring their identity while evoking trauma and loss. Less haunting, **William Villalongo** fashions the figure through an accumulation of decorative patterns and collage elements. In his *Corner Office*, 2017, swirling organic shapes suggest the body of an African-American office worker stretching to release the tension and discomfort of labor in the digital age, while **Carl Joe Williams**'s mixed-media painting *Waiting*, 2016, evokes a present-day holy family, albeit one waiting for a bus and holding a smartphone. In this way, the rhythm of everyday experience collides with historical concerns, resulting in a colorfully nuanced expression.

Like many prominent collections of African-American art, the Petrucci Family Foundation Collection spans decades, charting a journey of self-expression that dates to the nineteenth century, runs through the Harlem Renaissance and civil rights movements, and continues to this day. As artists continue to construct, and reconstruct, African-American identity, the challenges and promise of American history become magnified, contested, and enriched. By sharing the Petrucci Family Foundation Collection with the Lehigh Valley, the Allentown Art Museum presents the aesthetic, political, and cultural character of African-American art, an experience rich in diversity and expression.

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Lorna Simpson (b. 1960), *Counting*, 1991, photogravure with screenprint. © Lorna Simpson



Vanessa German (b. 1976), *2 ships passing in the night, or i take my soul with me everywhere i go, thank you*, 2014, mixed media assemblage. © Vanessa German