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1946 Life Magazine Offers Platform for 12 ‘Negro’ Artists

by VICTORIA L. VALENTINE on Jan 14, 2014 • 11:57 pm

1 Comment



NUDE FROM THE WAIST UP, **Eldzier Cortor**'s vision of Black female beauty made quite a statement in 1946 when it was showcased in Life magazine.

While other Black artists, preoccupied with racial uplift, generally portrayed Black women in morally unambiguous circumstances, Cortor embraced the natural beauty and power of their bodies. In his view, dignity did not necessarily require clothing. The publication of Cortor's "Southern Gate" in Life was a milestone. The feature offered a rare platform for many other artists, too.



IMAGE: Top right, ELDZIER CORTOR, "Southern Gate," 1942-1943 (oil on canvas) | Courtesy Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. David K. Anderson, Martha Jackson Memorial Collection

The visually inspiring work of 12 Black artists appears in the July 22, 1946, issue of *Life*, America's treasured, photo-driven news weekly. In an article titled, "Negro Artists: Their Works Win Top U.S. Honors," Cortor is joined by a few emerging artists and figures who would come to be regarded among the most important artists of the century,

including **Richmond Barthe, Romare Bearden, Palmer Hayden, Sargent Johnson, William H. Johnson, Jacob Lawrence and Horace Pippin.**

The opening line of the four-page, un-bylined article states:

“The paintings and sculptures shown on these pages are interesting not because they were done by Negroes but because they represent some of the best works turned out by American artists today.”

Three brief paragraphs outline the conditions and opportunities experienced by Black artists in America, from freed slave Joshua Johnson at the end of the 18th century to 19th and 20th century artists who sought recognition in Europe.

The exposure offered by the Harmon Foundation exhibits in 1928 and 1935 is mentioned, along with the founding of the WPA's Federal Art Project, which helped develop Black artists, including Cortor, one of the last living African America artists to participate in the project. The government program provided jobs, training and opportunities to exhibit their work, many for the first time.

The feature copy asserts the following:

“They avoided painting Negro subjects partly because few people were interested in them. Finally in the mid-’20s, Negro artists began to paint and write about themselves. Their work began to take on vigor and validity it had lacked.” — Life magazine

This confidence and pride is evident in the selected works. All are figurative and representational, portraying Black people and black life. Cortor's practice idealized black women.

Influenced by the lines and forms of West African sculpture, Cortor's oil on canvas "Southern Gate" (1942-43) depicts a statuesque woman with an elongated torso. A chain and cross lazily adorns her neck, while her stylish natural hair is embellished with a trio of sunflowers tucked behind her ear.





Pages 62-63: Far right, "Southern Gate" by Eldzier Cortor. Clockwise from left, "Moses" by Marion Perkins, 38; "Head" by Richmond Barthe, 45; "Chester" by Sargent Johnson, 56; "Draped Head" by William E. Artis, 32; and "Head of a Boy" by **Eloise** Bishop, 25.

The composition of the work and its symbolic elements, make a profound social comment. Situated in a green pasture, as the Oxford African American Studies Center describes, she is "standing triumphant" in the foreground before a Southern gate and decaying pillar — the "ruins of history" — in the background. Patriotic-hued red-white-and blue fabric falls sensually around her hips while a bird perches on her shoulder, perhaps representing hope and a new era.

Life provided the following caption for the work (shown at the top of this page) which is now in the collection of the Smithsonian American Art Museum: "'Southern Gate' by Eldzier Cortor, 30, of Chicago who has won prizes at Chicago Art Institute. Here he painted a young Negro girl with a mockingbird on her shoulder against a background symbolizing the old South."

Such detailed captions accompany each of the works of art and include the artist's age (Horace Pippin, 58, is the oldest; The youngest is 24-year-old John Wilson) and intriguing nuggets of biographical information.

The "Moses" sculpture by Marion Perkins, for example, was carved three years prior to appearing in Life, "during his spare time while running a newsstand at 37th Street and Indian Avenue in Chicago. Price \$150." Bearden is working at the New York Department of Welfare at the time of the publication—a social work position he held for three decades, through the 1960s. We also learn that 25-year-old **Eloise** Bishop, the only woman included, graduated from Bennington College and works at the Museum of Modern Art.

Published just five years after Fortune magazine featured a portfolio of images from Lawrence's Migration series—the first time the work of a Black artist had appeared in a mainstream publication—the Life article represents one of the earliest opportunities for millions of Americans across the country to be exposed to art created by black artists. **CT**

Life magazine, July 22, 1946, “Negro Artists: Their Works Win Top U.S. Honors,” pages 62-65.

NEGRO ARTISTS



INTERIOR is by Jacob Lawrence, 28, of Newark, whose abstracts portray American Negroes in 1932. It is a woman, dressed in a dark dress, standing in a room.

standing through the back in a doorway. When she got out of the room, she was looking at the wall. The wall was covered with a red and white pattern.

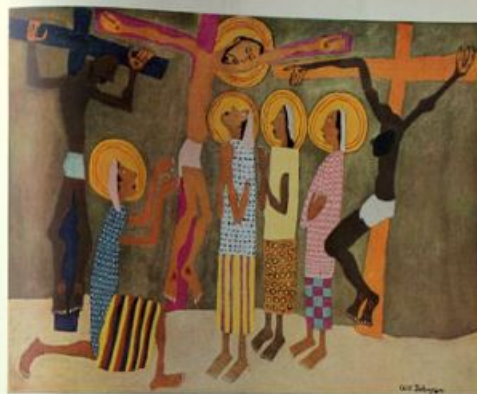


JOHN BROWN GOING TO HIS HANGING is a group of people, some of whom are looking at a book.

some of whom are looking at a book. The book is a book of the Negroes of the South.



FACTORY WORKERS is a group of people, some of whom are looking at a book.



MOUNT CALVARY is a group of people, some of whom are looking at a book.

one of the people, some of whom are looking at a book. The book is a book of the Negroes of the South.



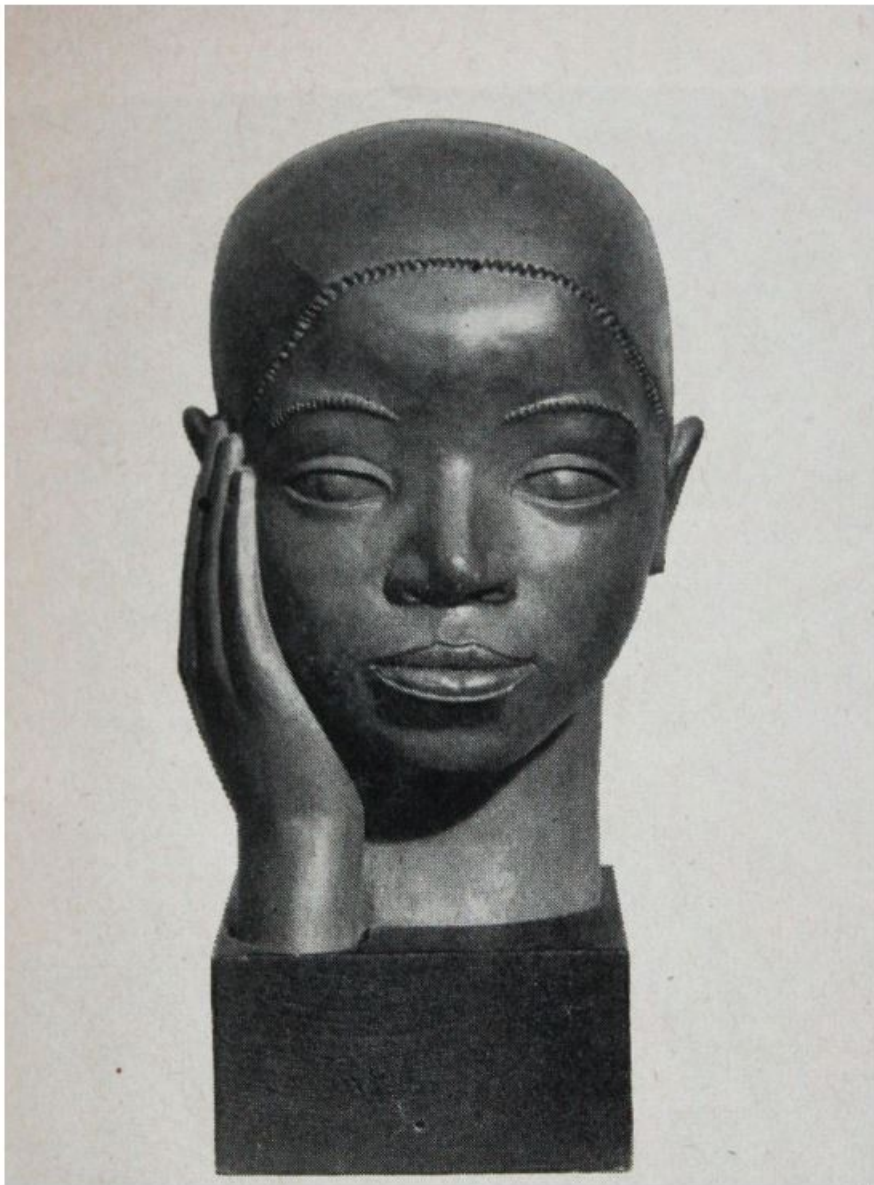
MOTHER AND CHILD is a group of people, some of whom are looking at a book.



BAPTIZING DAY is a group of people, some of whom are looking at a book.

one of the people, some of whom are looking at a book. The book is a book of the Negroes of the South.

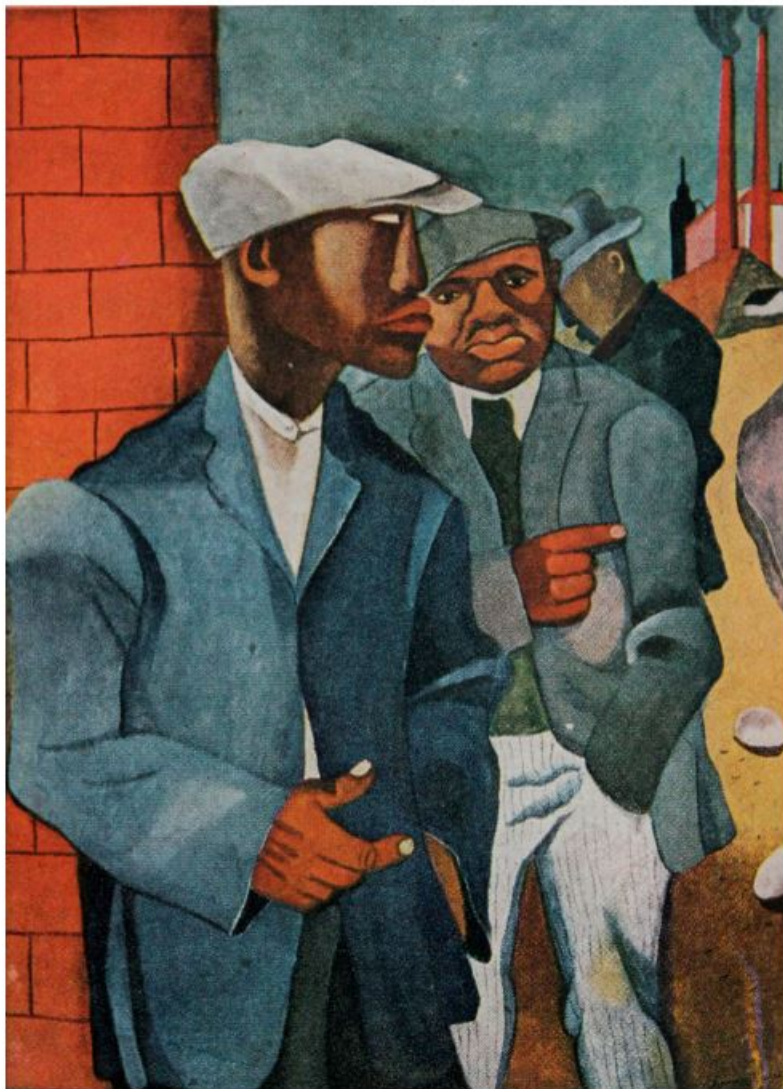
Pages 64-65: Left, clockwise from top, “Interior” by Jacob Lawrence, 28; “Factory Workers” by Romare Bearden, 32; and “John Brown Going to His Hanging” by Horace Pippin, 58. Right, clockwise from top, “Mount Calvary” by William H. Johnson, 45; “Baptizing Day” by 56-year-old Palmer Hayden; and “Mother and Child” By John Wilson, 24.



Life caption (page 63): "Chester" was done by Sargent Johnson, 56, who has won many art prizes in California where he now lives.



Life caption (page 64): [Detail of] "John Brown Going to His Hanging" is one of many historical subjects by the 58-year-old painter, Horace Pippin. One of his canvases received honorable mention at the Carnegie Institute in 1944.



caption (page 64): [Detail of] "Factory Worker" is by Romare Bearden, 32, who works for the New York Department of Welfare.