

10 TO KNOW

BLACK PAINTERS from 1840 to the present



Jacob Lawrence. In the late 1930s, Jacob Lawrence began to paint narrative series of key moments in Black history, using simplified figures painted on hardboard panels. The most famous of these, the stunning 60-painting *Migration of the Negro* series, depicts the Black experience in the Great Migration of the 1920s-30s. Completed in 1941 when he was just 23, the *Migration Series* made Lawrence the most famous Black painter in the US. Other early series by Jacob Lawrence feature the lives of Toussaint L'Ouverture, Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman, and John Brown. His later works include a series on *Aesop's Fables* and several *Builders* series. In 1970, Lawrence became the first painter to win the NAACP's Spingarn Medal.

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Henry Ossawa Tanner. The artist of 1893's *The Banjo Lesson*, Tanner was one of the first Black artists to become internationally famous. He studied under Thomas Eakins in Philadelphia, but he moved to Paris in 1891 to get away from racism. Tanner was among the first artists to depict Black people as complex figures and not racial caricatures, in realist works like *The Banjo Lesson* and *The Thankful Poor*. After painting *Daniel in the Lion's Den* in 1895, Tanner explored religious themes in a variety of artistic styles in his remaining work. In 1996, Tanner's *Sand Dunes at Sunset, Atlantic City* became the first painting by an African American in the White House permanent collection.

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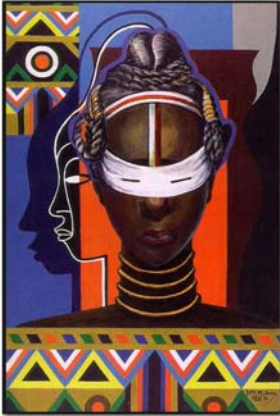
Romare Bearden. Bearden was one of the greatest American masters of collage. Born in Charlotte in 1911 and raised in New York City, Bearden joined the Harlem Artists Guild in 1935 and became a prolific painter. He was in the Army from 1942-45, was a Social Services caseworker from the 1930s-1960s, and studied philosophy at the Sorbonne in the 1950s. This wide array of experience influenced Bearden's art, which blended modern art styles like cubism and Dada with American cultural traditions. His many notable works include 1941's *The Cotton Pickers*, 1974's *Empress of the Blues*, and the 1977 *Black Odyssey* series. Bearden was also a supporter of the art community: he was the first arts director of the Harlem Cultural Council, co-founded the Spiral art group, designed costumes for the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, and wrote such books as 1972's *Six Black Masters of American Art*.

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Jean-Michel Basquiat. Though he only lived to age 27, Basquiat was part of the New York art scene for a decade. Born in Brooklyn in 1960, Basquiat created graffiti art as a teenager under the tag SAMO, and he produced t-shirts, collages, and drawings as well. At age 20, his paintings on canvas became extremely popular in galleries, and he had his first solo show at 21. Basquiat collaborated with Andy Warhol on a number of works in the mid-1980s. Basquiat's paintings feature a wild mix of imagery and symbolism from various cultures, ranging from Greek and Aztec to Afro-Caribbean, often with text and diagrams scrawled on the canvas.

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Lois Mailou Jones. A longtime professor of design and watercolor painting at Howard University, Jones painted in a wide variety of styles from the 1920s-1990s. Born in Boston, Jones often painted in France to be free from racism. Some influences on her art include French impressionism, Haitian art, and especially African art, and she traveled extensively in Africa and the Caribbean to research local art and to champion Black artists. Among her many notable paintings are 1932's *Ascent of Ethiopia*, 1938's *Les Fetiches*, 1954's *Peasant Girl, Haiti*, and 1972's *Ode to Kinshasa* and *Ubi Girl from Tai Region*. Jones also produced collaborative works like her 30 illustrations for Carter G. Woodson's book *African Heroes and Heroines*.

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Hale Woodruff. Best known today for his vibrant murals, Hale Woodruff also played an invaluable role in the development of art at HBCUs. In 1931, Woodruff founded the art department at Atlanta University, now Clark Atlanta, and he held art classes at Spelman and Morehouse. In 1938, Talladega College commissioned Woodruff to paint a series of murals celebrating the 100th anniversary of the successful slave uprising aboard the *Amistad*. The resulting paintings of the mutiny, trial, and repatriation of *Amistad* slaves are among the great murals in American art. Woodruff's other works include the *Art of the Negro* mural series at Clark Atlanta and the abstract *Celestial Gate* series in the 1950s.

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Kara Walker. Walker is best known for black cut-paper silhouettes that depict slavery in a narrative tableau. Often these tableaux are large: the 1997 work *Slavery! Slavery!* is a 360-degree mural that encircles the viewer. Some of Walker's works feature colorfully painted or projected backdrops, as in the 2001 work *Trilogy*. A professor at Columbia, Walker won a MacArthur Foundation "genius" grant in 1997, when she was only 27. Kara Walker's more recent works include a 2014 installation at an abandoned New York sugar factory, featuring a massive Sphinx-like sugar sculpture entitled *A Subtlety*.

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Robert S. Duncanson. In 1861, the *Cincinnati Daily Gazette* called Duncanson “the best landscape painter in the West.” Influenced by the Hudson River School painters, Duncanson began painting landscapes of the Ohio River valley in the 1840s, and he later painted landscapes of New England, Canada, and Europe as well. Duncanson blended landscape with literature in works like 1853’s *Uncle Tom and Little Eva*, based on the novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, and 1861’s *Land of the Lotus Eaters*, based on a Tennyson poem. Duncanson also did portraits of such noted abolitionists as James Birney, Freeman Cary, and Rev. Richard Rust, the first president of Wilberforce University.

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Alma Thomas. Alma Woodsey Thomas is best known for colorful abstract paintings, nearly all of which were painted after she turned 70! Howard University’s first fine arts graduate in 1924, Thomas taught art at a DC junior high school for 35 years, then embraced a new painting style after retiring. Drawing inspiration from Washington Color School painters and from her own garden, she used thousands of irregular daubs of color, like tiles in a mosaic, in paintings such as *Breeze Rustling Through Fall Flowers* and *Springtime in Washington*. In 1972, at age 80, Alma Thomas became the first Black female artist to have a solo exhibit at New York’s Whitney Museum of American Art, and in 2009, two of her paintings were chosen for display in the White House.

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Faith Ringgold. Faith Ringgold is a master of mixed media art, blending painting with other art forms such as sculpture and quilting. Her 1960s works, like *The Flag is Bleeding*, often feature strong political messages about racism and women’s rights, and in the 1970s she began using masks, soft sculptures, and Tibet-inspired cloth frames. Ringgold’s first story quilt appeared in 1983: *Who’s Afraid of Aunt Jemima?* features 56 panels of painted human figures, quilted fabric, and handwritten text. It tells a tale of Jemima as a successful businesswoman, removing all context or symbolism of servitude. Faith Ringgold has also written many children’s books, including 1991’s *Tar Beach* based on one of her story quilts.

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