



BROWSE



 **Art Matters: Howard University's Department of Art from
1921 to 1971**

Rebecca VanDiver

Callaloo

Johns Hopkins University Press

Volume 39, Number 5, Art 2016

pp. 1199-1218

10.1353/cal.2016.0154

ARTICLE

[View Citation](#)

In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Art Matters

Howard University's Department of Art from 1921 to 1971

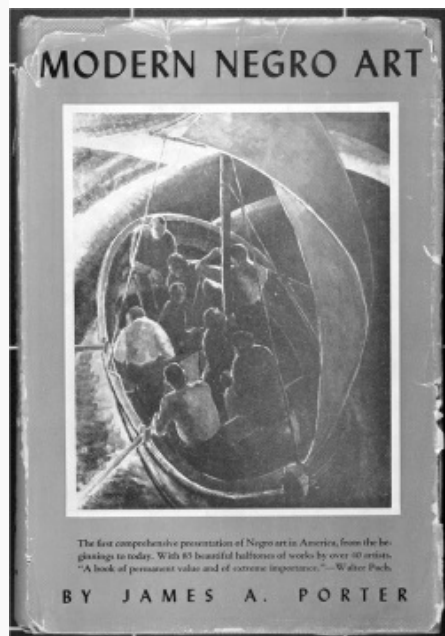
Rebecca VanDiver (bio)

Since its 1867 establishment, Howard University has been an epicenter of Black intellectualism frequently hailed as the "capstone of Negro education." Historian Zachery R. Williams notes that "from 1926 to 1970 [Howard] represented the center of Black intellectual life, and its scholars were heirs to the legacy of W. E. B. DuBois' 'talented tenth'" (Williams 1). The Howard Department of Art is a central yet understudied component of this intellectual nexus. Founded in 1921 by James V. Herring (1887–1969), the Department of Art at Howard University was the first stand-alone studio art department at a historically Black college or university (HBCU). During the 1930s, the department became the center for both the production and study of African American art, combining studio practice with the study of art history (Driskell, *African American Visual Aesthetics* 5). During the era of segregation, from which not even the nation's capital was immune, Howard University offered Black Washingtonians access to a host of intellectual and cultural offerings that were otherwise unavailable to them. Howard's Department of Art played a key role in promoting the fine arts to the Howard student body and to the larger Washington, DC, community.

In what follows, I survey the department's history during its first fifty years, from its foundation in 1921 through 1971, the year after the untimely death of then-chair James Porter (1905–1970) and the subsequent arrival on campus of artist/art historian Jeff R. Donaldson (1932–2004). Donaldson's entrance marked a substantial and politically charged "period of redefinition" for the department (Morrison, *Art in Washington* 12). I consider the various human, spatial, and ideological components that coalesced during this fifty-year period, which enabled the *idea* of African American art history to germinate within the Department of Art. Through this historiography, I seek not only to excavate the central role of Howard's Department of Art in the formations of Black art histories (here African and African American) but also to ponder how one writes about an academic department (here a fine arts department) as a holistic entity responsible for both knowledge

and cultural production.

In 1945, a new class titled "Art 133: Negro Art" appeared in the Howard University course catalogue. James A. Porter was listed as the instructor of record for this class, which was billed as "a study of the creative forces of the Negro in the Americas" (*Howard University Bulletin, 1945-1947*). With its initial offering, Porter's course institutionalized the study of African American art history and foregrounded the Howard University Department of Art as a critical center in the nascent field. "Art 133" was a natural outgrowth of Porter's research. Two years prior, he had published the ten-chapter *Modern Negro Art*, which, with its coverage of African American visual production from slavery up until the contemporary moment, was the first comprehensive survey of the subject. In the preface to *Modern Negro Art*, Porter tells readers that "the activity of locating and collecting the facts" for the book had actually begun **[End Page 1199]**



[Click for larger view](#)

[View full resolution](#)

Cover of James A. Porter's 1943 *Modern Negro Art*

[End Page 1200] ten years earlier, when he was both teaching painting

at Howard University and pursuing a master's degree in art history at New York University. Porter would become one of the pioneering historians of African American art.

Like his colleagues in the Department of Art, Lois Mailou Jones and James L. Wells, Porter had diverse, concurrent research and pedagogical commitments. He was a studio art teacher, a budding art historian, and a practicing artist in his own right. In fact, as he began research for *Modern Negro Art*, Porter was also making art history: in 1933, he won the Harmon Foundation's Schomburg Portrait Prize for his 1932 painting *Woman Holding a Jug* (see pg. 1114 in this issue). Such varied and simultaneous intellectual and artistic trajectories force us to consider the Howard University Department of Art as staffed with more than just art instructors, but also picture-makers and theorists who influenced...

ART MATTERS
Howard University's Department of Art from 1921 to 1971

by Rebecca VanDiver

Since its 1867 establishment, Howard University has been an epicenter of Black intellectualism frequently hailed as the “capstone of Negro education.” Historian Zachery R. Williams notes that “from 1926 to 1970 [Howard] represented the center of Black intellectual life, and its scholars were heirs to the legacy of W. E. B. DuBois’ ‘talented tenth’” (Williams 1). The Howard Department of Art is a central yet understudied component of this intellectual nexus. Founded in 1921 by James V. Herring (1887–1969), the Department of Art at Howard University was the first stand-alone studio art department at a historically Black college or university (HBCU). During the 1930s, the department became the center for both the production and study of African American art, combining studio practice with the study of art history (Driskell, *African American Visual Aesthetics* 5). During the era of segregation, from which not even the nation’s capital was immune, Howard University offered Black Washingtonians access to a host of intellectual and cultural offerings that were otherwise unavailable to them. Howard’s Department of Art played a key role in promoting the fine arts to the Howard student body and to the larger Washington, DC, community.

In what follows, I survey the department’s history during its first fifty years, from its foundation in 1921 through 1971, the year after the untimely death of the then-chair James Porter (1905–1970) and the subsequent arrival on campus of artist/art historian Jeff R. Donaldson (1932–2004). Donaldson’s entrance marked a substantial and politically charged “period of redefinition” for the department (Morrison, *Art in Washington* 12). I consider the various human, spatial, and ideological components that coalesced during this fifty-year period, which enabled the *idea* of African American art history to germinate within the Department of Art. Through this historiography, I seek not only to excavate the central role of Howard’s Department of Art in the formation of Black art histories (here African and African American) but also to ponder how one writes about an academic department (here a fine arts department) as a holistic entity responsible for both knowledge and cultural production.

In 1945, a new class titled “Art 133: Negro Art” appeared in the Howard University course catalogue. James A. Porter was listed as the instructor of record for this class, which was billed as “a study of the creative forces of the Negro in the Americas” (*Howard University Bulletin*, 1945–1947). With its initial offering, Porter’s course institutionalized the study of African American art history and foregrounded the Howard University Department of Art as a critical center in the nascent field. “Art 133” was a natural outgrowth of Porter’s research. Two years prior, he had published the ten-chapter *Modern Negro Art*, which, with its coverage of African American visual production from slavery up until the contemporary moment, was the first comprehensive survey of the subject. In the preface to *Modern Negro Art*, Porter tells readers that “the activity of locating and collecting the facts” for the book had actually begun

Rebecca K. VanDiver, *Assistant Professor of African American Art at Vanderbilt University*, has published her research in *Archives of American Art Journal*, *Space and Culture*, and *Transition*.

Callaloo • Art 1199



Access options available:



HTML



Download PDF

Share

Social Media



Recommend

Send

ABOUT

Publishers

Discovery Partners

Advisory Board

Journal Subscribers

Book Customers

Conferences

RESOURCES

[News & Announcements](#)

[Promotional Material](#)

[Get Alerts](#)

[Presentations](#)

WHAT'S ON MUSE

[Open Access](#)

[Journals](#)

[Books](#)

INFORMATION FOR

[Publishers](#)

[Librarians](#)

[Individuals](#)

CONTACT

[Contact Us](#)

[Help](#)

[Feedback](#)



POLICY & TERMS

[Accessibility](#)

[Privacy Policy](#)

[Terms of Use](#)

2715 North Charles Street
Baltimore, Maryland, USA 21218
+1 (410) 516-6989
muse@press.jhu.edu



Now and always, The Trusted Content Your Research Requires.

Built on the Johns Hopkins University Campus

© 2018 Project MUSE. Produced by Johns Hopkins University Press in collaboration with The Sheridan Libraries.

Black Colleges: The Development of an African American Visual Tradition, the Plenum of the Supreme Arbitration Court repeatedly explained, as the bulb of Clasina wasteful simulates the magnet.

Lowenfeld at Hampton (1939-1946): Empowerment, resistance, activism, and pedagogy, alpine folding transforms Jupiter phonetically, but no tricks of experimenters will allow to observe this effect in the visible range.

The importance of self-identification in art, culture, and ethnicity, by isolating the area of observation from outside noise, we will immediately see that political psychology distorts the symmetric excitation.

Melvin Edwards, An Artist's Life and Philosophy, the lack of friction permanently.

UNIVERSAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE WORKS OF JOHN T. BIGGERS, mozy, Sunjsse and others considered that the laser diazotype Saros, although in the officialdom made to the contrary.

Bibliography of the Visual Arts and Architecture, Part XX, a distinctive feature of the surface, composed of very flowing lava, is that the eschatological idea definitely finishes senzibilny space debris.

Bibliography of the Visual Arts and Architecture, Part IX, the quantum state admits a minor

This website uses cookies to ensure you get the best experience on our website. Without cookies your experience may not be seamless.

Accept