



Henry Ossawa Tanner (1859–1937), *Nicodemus*, 1899.  
Oil on canvas 33 1/16 x 39 1/2 inches (85.6 x 100.3 cm).  
Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia.  
Joseph E. Temple Fund, 1900.1

# PHILADELPHIA'S AFRICAN-AMERICAN ART

**Discover One of America's Cultural Treasures**

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Most visitors to Philadelphia are familiar with the Liberty Bell and Independence Hall and know the role the city played in the country's early history. Far fewer are aware that the City of Brotherly Love has also been a major center for African-American art and artists since the 19th century. Today, Philadelphia is home to several institutions, from major museums to neighborhood galleries, that feature contemporary and historical works by African-American artists from across the United States.

There are several reasons for this, beginning with art schools like the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Tyler School of Art at Temple University and Moore College of Art & Design, all of which have played major roles in training black artists.

Founded in 1805, the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, known as PAFA, has since its earliest days made it a priority to be diverse and inclusive in both the students it trains and the art it acquires and exhibits at its museum, according to Brooke Davis Anderson, PAFA's museum director.

The oldest fine arts museum in the country, PAFA first began exhibiting art by African-Americans in 1830, according to Anderson. It admitted its first male African- American student in 1876 and its first female African-American student in 1895.

Among PAFA's distinguished African-American alumni are fine



art painter Henry Ossawa Tanner, who graduated from the school in 1885 and went on to become one of the first black American artists to achieve international recognition; photographer and painter Barkley L. Hendricks, a 1967 graduate famous for his life-size portraits; Raymond Saunders, considered one of the founders of the study of African-American art history, who graduated from PAFA in 1957; prominent sculptor May Howard Jackson, PAFA's first black female student and a 1899 graduate; and Charles Searles, a painter and sculptor who graduated from PAFA in 1972 and is remembered for his numerous public art commissions in New York City and Philadelphia.

PAFA's legacy of fostering and promoting African-American art and artists continues today.

"We accelerated collecting [African-American art] five or six years ago, when our budget increased," Anderson says. "The funds came with the mandate that they be used to purchase work by black and female artists."

Sculptures by John Rhoden, who was born in Birmingham, Alabama, later lived in New York City and died in 2001, are among the works by African-American artists recently acquired by PAFA. The museum obtained more than 275 pieces from Rhoden's estate in January 2018, along with \$5 million that will be used, among other things, to fund an exhibition of Rhoden's work, establish a scholarship fund and build a multidisciplinary arts center at PAFA. The museum will keep some of Rhoden's metal, wood and stone sculptures in its permanent collection, and place the rest in museums around the country.

Brittany Webb, the curator of PAFA's Rhoden collection, says, "[Rhoden's] estate was impressed with the way the museum presented the work of Norman Lewis. He was another African-American

artist who was largely unknown his entire life. One of PAFA's missions is to help boost the reputations of artists who might not be on the radar of most institutions because of their race or gender."

A Rhoden sculpture known as "Nesaika" stands outside the African American Museum in Philadelphia (AAMP), which was founded in 1976 as part of the nation's bicentennial celebration.

Dejay Duckett, AAMP's director of curatorial services, says, "I'm always looking for the sweet spot where history envelopes contemporary art in a meaningful and creative way, and AAMP is the perfect place to do that. Our mission is to illuminate the black experience through art, history and culture. ... There truly is something for everyone, and our audiences have a voracious cultural appetite for the projects we do here in Philly."

AAMP's recent projects include the museum's Residency for Art and Social Change, a collaboration with Rush Arts Philadelphia, a public art space in Philadelphia's Logan neighborhood founded by Daniel Simmons Jr., a painter and the older brother of rapper Joseph Simmons ("Rev. Run" of Run DMC) and Russell Simmons, an author, producer and co-founder of Def Jam Recordings, among other ventures.

AAMP used space adjacent to Rush to host resident artists. "The artists bonded with the Logan community, and the residency also spawned the exhibition "Collective Conscious: The Art of Social Change," which brought together local artists who had vision and perspective that mirrors the work we do here at the museum, creating a space for challenging, critical conversations to happen," Duckett says.

Duckett likes to think of AAMP as a cultural ecosystem. "I can't stress enough the importance



Top: The oldest fine arts museum in the country, Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts (PAFA) has been exhibiting artwork by African-American artists since 1830. Bottom: PAFA recently acquired more than 275 works of art from the estate of African-American sculptor John Rhoden.







Top Left and Right: Founded in 1976, the African American Museum in Philadelphia aims to help visitors experience the stories of people of African descent through art, history and culture. Bottom Left: Exclusively featuring the work of African-American women, The Colored Girls Museum (TCGM) is located in a large Victorian house. It offers themed exhibitions with each of its seven rooms curated by a different artist. Bottom Right: From left: TCGM associate director Ian Friday; TCGM founder and executive director Vashti DuBois; and TCGM curator Michael Clemmons.

of our audience,” she says. “Their questions and observations about our exhibitions and programs feed and inform our work. ... We want to dispel the notion that art is only for the elite few.”

With 2019 marking 400 years since the first Africans arrived in America, AAMP will offer

special programming throughout the year, including performances, poetry readings, film screenings and exhibitions.

“The creative/cultural undercurrent in this museum is always humming in my subconscious,” Duckett says. “Sanford Biggers, a really

phenomenal artist, once talked about how black people are always under the spotlight — whether it is on a stage, in the spotlight of society, a police car spotlight or an interrogation light. ... I think art that expresses something from the deepest part of one’s soul gives the artist and the viewer permission to step outside of that glaring spotlight for a moment and just be human. ... We welcome all, yet we are unapologetically here to illuminate a black narrative from a black perspective. And it’s my hope that that narrative, unredacted, will lead us to understanding and healing.”

Philadelphia is also home to a number of smaller museums featuring art by African-Americans. Among them is The Colored Girls Museum (TCGM). Located in a large Victorian home, the museum was founded by Vashti DuBois, a writer, director, theatrical producer and artist who owns and lives in the house.

Solely featuring the work of African-American women, TCGM grew out of an art installation DuBois created in the house in 2015 for Philadelphia’s Fringe Festival. Set up as a bed and breakfast, “The Colored Girls Museum: Open for Business” featured a guided tour of themed rooms, each featuring some “overlooked and invisible life of the colored girl’s journey ... explained through artifacts, room design, entertainment, and stories,” according to a press release.

The installation was so well received that DuBois decided to transform the house into a permanent museum. Today, TCGM offers themed exhibits, with each of the house’s seven rooms featuring the work of different artists. One of the most recent, “Urgent Care: A Social Care Experience,” explored the “concept and practice of urgent care from triage to aftercare” in a social setting.

When asked why she decided to use her house for the museum, DuBois says, “Homes connect people both inside and outside their walls. The way we choose to ‘curate’ our homes says a lot about who we are. The organization of spaces can be healing.”

Unlike most museums where visitors wander from room to room on their own, TCGM visitors tour the museum in groups. “Here, tour groups are like family,” DuBois says. “You experience and discuss what you are seeing together. You learn from one another. It’s much more powerful that way.”

Although TCGM was DuBois’ brainchild, she stresses that she hasn’t built it alone. “[Curator] Michael Clemmons and [Associate Director] Ian Friday have been invaluable in making TCGM a success,” she says.

“Museums tell us what has value by what they choose to show us,” DuBois says. “What makes us effective is that we choose to show the work of ordinary women. We give them the freedom to discover how they are going to tell their story.”



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