

Harvard Art Museums

Fogg Museum
Busch-Reisinger Museum
Arthur M. Sackler Museum

Press Release

Harvard Art Museums Acquire Kara Walker Drawing from Fall 2017 Sikkema Jenkins & Co. Exhibition



Kara Walker, U.S.A. Idioms, 2017. Collage of Sumi ink and graphite on cut newspaper on gessoed white wove paper. 355.9 x 448.6 cm (140 1/8 x 176 5/8 in). Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum, Margaret Fisher Fund, [2017.220](#). © Kara Walker; image courtesy of Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York.

Cambridge, MA
December 5, 2017

The Harvard Art Museums have acquired *U.S.A. Idioms* (2017), a monumental drawing created by artist Kara Walker in the summer of 2017 amid heightened political turmoil and racial violence across the country. This unrest culminated most visibly in the white nationalist rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, in August that left one dead and more than twenty injured.

The large-scale work—nearly 12 by 15 feet—was included in Walker’s highly regarded Fall 2017 [exhibition](#), *Sikkema Jenkins and Co. is Compelled to Present the Most Astounding and Important Painting show of the fall Art Show viewing season!*, presented at the New York gallery.

In her artist’s statement for the exhibition, written and delivered after the Charlottesville rally, Walker wrote: “I am tired, tired of standing up, being counted, tired of ‘having a voice,’ or worse, ‘being a role model.’ Tired, true, of being a featured member of my racial group and/or my gender niche... I roll my

eyes, fold my arms, and wait. How many ways can a person say racism is the real bread and butter of our American mythology...?”

Walker became famous in the 1990s for large-scale, cut-paper, silhouetted figures that narrate her candid investigations of race, gender, sexuality, violence, and identity. In 2014, the artist gained still more renown with *A Subtlety*, the gargantuan “sugar sphinx” installed in the defunct Domino sugar factory in Brooklyn. Her latest work, which merges collage, political cartooning, and history painting, has been described by *New York Times* art critic Roberta Smith as “a brawl of works on paper.” In *U.S.A. Idioms*, the artist explores a theme that has long been evident in her work: the brutal legacies of slavery, including the simmering racism and oppression that remain painfully present today. Using sumi ink on paper, Walker renders her by now iconic African American figures and their oppressors within a sparse landscape of knotty, twisted tree trunks and bare limbs, cutting and pasting these figures and the landscape onto an enormous white-gessoed ground. The work is a volatile collage of recognizable figures from Walker’s oeuvre; multiple narratives play out and interweave in a statement that is as monumental in its message as in its scale.

“This is a powerhouse of a work—provocative in its subject and scale and also, as a drawing, incredibly beautiful and technically exhilarating,” said Martha Tedeschi, the Elizabeth and John Moors Cabot Director of the Harvard Art Museums. “Given the teaching and learning mission of the Harvard Art Museums, and our legacy as a site for the study of great drawings from across time and place, it feels especially appropriate for us to bring this new and compelling work to Cambridge. Harvard’s president Drew Gilpin Faust, a scholar of the Civil War, slavery, and the American South, has drawn attention to the university’s institutional history and has prompted the campus community to examine painful realities of African American heritage that have until recently remained unspoken and unaddressed. Walker’s willingness to foreground ‘contentious images and objectionable ideas,’ to use the artist’s own words, challenges us to look, not look away.”

The acquisition of *U.S.A. Idioms* comes as Faust completes her final year as president of Harvard; it is the among the first major purchases of contemporary art under Tedeschi, who became director of the Harvard Art Museums in July 2016. The museums are currently developing an exhibition plan for *U.S.A. Idioms*.

The acquisition of the work was orchestrated by Mary Schneider Enriquez, the Houghton Associate Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art, and Edouard Kopp, the Maida and George Abrams Curator of Drawings. The two have been working together with other colleagues at the Harvard Art Museums to bolster the collection of contemporary drawings. Well aware of Kara Walker’s work and impact, they actively sought to acquire a major example of her draftsmanship. They were among the first museum representatives to reserve one of Walker’s new works from the Sikkema Jenkins & Co. exhibition.

“Kara Walker is one of the most thought-provoking and ground-breaking artists of our time,” said Schneider Enriquez. “She has an incomparable vision, articulating biting issues like racism, oppression, and gender in a way that demonstrates her mastery of visual expression.” Added Kopp: “You know a great work of art when you see one. Here is a magisterial drawing that combines graphic power, expressive force, and narrative ambiguity on the grand scale of history painting. Intensely thought-provoking and sadly topical, *U.S.A. Idioms* seems to both invite and defy interpretation.”

Schneider Enriquez and Kopp expect that *U.S.A. Idioms* will draw interest from a wide variety of disciplines, including history, law, literature, political science, religion, philosophy, art history, and visual and environmental studies. The museums will support exploration of Walker’s themes, as well as her artistic practice as a whole, both in the galleries and in the Art Study Center, where students, scholars, and general visitors can view other works by Walker in the collections.

The museums began collecting Walker's work in 1997, with the acquisition of *Untitled (John Brown)*, a print created that same year. Also in the collections are four silhouette works: a pop-up book of cut silhouettes titled *Freedom: A Fable* (1997), the large linocut *African/American* (1998), and two prints from her provocative 2005 series *Harper's Pictorial History of the Civil War (Annotated)*. The museums also have two textual prints, *Dinah Washington* (2010) and *Augusta Savage* (2010), which mark the artist's transition from the exploration of 19th-century African American life in the rural American South to an examination of modern urban life, adding further context and nuance to the overall understanding of Walker's oeuvre. *African/American* was recently on display as part of the installation *Vision and Justice: The Art of Citizenship*, complementing a course taught by Sarah Lewis, Assistant Professor in the Departments of History of Art and Architecture and African and African American Studies at Harvard University. In Fall 2007, in honor of Faust's inauguration as Harvard president, the Fogg Museum presented a month-long installation of the entirety of Walker's *Harper's Pictorial History of the Civil War (Annotated)* series.

Born in Stockton, California, Kara Walker (b. 1969) was raised from the age of 13 in Atlanta, Georgia. She studied at the Atlanta College of Art (B.F.A. 1991) and the Rhode Island School of Design (M.F.A. 1994). She has received numerous awards, including the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Achievement Award in 1997, the United States Artists Eileen Harris Norton Fellowship in 2008, and, most recently, the W.E.B. Du Bois Medal from the Hutchins Center at Harvard University, among others.

Walker is a remarkable teacher and speaker whose past talks at the Radcliffe Institute drew overflow crowds. The Harvard Art Museums plan to invite Walker to campus to give a talk and interact with students and the public in the coming year.

About the Harvard Art Museums' Drawings Collection

The Harvard Art Museums' collection of European and American drawings from the 14th century to today numbers over 24,000 works and includes major masterpieces. Among the strengths are 17th- and early 19th-century French works, including the most extensive holdings of drawings by Ingres outside of France, as well as significant groups of works by Géricault and David. The collection also excels in Italian Renaissance works by Parmigianino, Michelangelo, and Pontormo, among others. Works by German and Netherlandish masters such as Dürer, Holbein, Bruegel, and Rembrandt are well represented, as are 19th-century British works by Blake, Beardsley, and the Pre-Raphaelites. In the American school, the collection includes more than 20 Homer watercolors; drawings and pastels by Whistler; and an incomparable grouping of about 400 drawings by Sargent. The collection also includes important holdings of works by 20th-century artists such as Edward Hopper, Henry Moore, David Smith, and Eva Hesse. Notable strengths in the Busch-Reisinger's drawings collection include works by Lovis Corinth, George Grosz, and the Bauhaus, as well as extensive holdings of drawings and watercolors by Lyonel Feininger, and postwar figures such as Ernst Wilhelm Nay, Joseph Beuys, and Hanne Darboven.

About the Harvard Art Museums

The Harvard Art Museums house one of the largest and most renowned art collections in the United States, and are comprised of three museums (the Fogg, Busch-Reisinger, and Arthur M. Sackler Museums) and four research centers (the Straus Center for Conservation and Technical Studies, the Center for the Technical Study of Modern Art, the Harvard Art Museums Archives, and the Archaeological Exploration of Sardis). The Fogg Museum includes Western art from the Middle Ages to the present; the Busch-Reisinger Museum, unique among North American museums, is dedicated to the study of all modes and periods of art from central and northern Europe, with an emphasis on German-speaking countries; and the Arthur M. Sackler Museum is focused on Asian art, Ancient Mediterranean and Near Eastern art, and Islamic and later Indian art. Together, the collections include approximately 250,000 objects in all media. The Harvard Art Museums are distinguished by the range and depth of their collections, their groundbreaking exhibitions, and the original research of their staff.

Integral to Harvard University and the wider community, the museums and research centers serve as resources for students, scholars, and the public. For more than a century they have been the nation's premier training ground for museum professionals and are renowned for their seminal role in developing the discipline of art history in the United States. The Harvard Art Museums have a rich tradition of considering the history of objects as an integral part of the teaching and study of art history, focusing on conservation and preservation concerns as well as technical studies. The Harvard Art Museums' 2014 renovation and expansion carried on the legacies of the three museums and united their remarkable collections under one roof for the first time. Renzo Piano Building Workshop preserved the Fogg Museum's landmark 1927 facility, while transforming the space to accommodate 21st-century needs. The museums now feature 40 percent more gallery space, an expanded Art Study Center, conservation labs, and classrooms, and a striking glass roof that bridges the facility's historic and contemporary architecture. The three constituent museums retain their distinct identities in the facility, yet their close proximity provides exciting opportunities to experience works of art in a broader context. harvardartmuseums.org

Hours and Admission

Daily, 10am–5pm. Closed major holidays. Admission: \$15 adults, \$13 seniors (65+), \$10 non-Harvard students (18+). Free for members; youth under 18; Cambridge residents (proof of residency required); and Harvard students, faculty, and staff (plus one guest). On Saturdays, from 10am–noon, Massachusetts residents receive free admission (proof of residency required). For further information about visiting, see harvardartmuseums.org/plan-your-visit.

Exhibitions, Events, and News

Our Special Exhibitions Gallery presents important new research on artists and artistic practice, and our University Galleries are programmed in consultation with Harvard faculty to support coursework. harvardartmuseums.org/visit/exhibitions

Lectures, workshops, films, performances, special events, and other programs are held throughout the year at the museums. harvardartmuseums.org/visit/calendar

Check out Index, our multimedia magazine, to keep up with what's happening at the Harvard Art Museums. harvardartmuseums.org/index-magazine

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