

CHARLES HENRY ALSTON

(b.1907, Charlotte, North Carolina d. 1977, New York, NY)

Education

1929 Columbia University, New York, NY
1931 Columbia's Teachers College, New York, NY
Harlem Arts Workshop

Exhibitions

1968-69 Fairleigh Dickenson Gallery of Modern Art, New York (One Man Show)
1958 Brussels World Fair
1952 Whitney Museum
1950 Metropolitan Museum of Art
1937 Baltimore Museum
1936 Museum of Modern Art

Museums and Permanent Collections

Metropolitan Museum of Art
Whitney Museum of American Art
Detroit Institute of Arts
Harlem Hospital
Frederick Douglass Institute

Selected Bibliography

Cederholm, Theresa D., *Afro-American Artists: A Bio-bibliographical Directory*. Boston Public Library, 1973.

"Harlem Hospital WPA Murals". *Institute for Research in African-American Studies Credits*. Columbia University (2006). Retrieved on 2007-08-06.

Herskovic, M., *American Abstract Expressionism of the 1950s An Illustrated Survey*, (New York School Press, 2003.) ISBN 0-9677994-1-4

Charles Alston came from a leading African American family in Charlotte, North Carolina, and was related to Romare Bearden through his mother's second marriage. He attended Columbia University as an undergraduate and received a M.F.A. at Columbia University's Teacher's College in 1931.

Alston began his art career while still a student, illustrating album covers for jazz musician Duke Ellington and book covers for poet Langston Hughes. Alston was a successful commercial artist, working for leading magazines such as Fortune, Collier's, Mademoiselle and Men's Wear. However, commercial art demanded compromises and restrictions on his style, eventually driving Alston out of the field in pursuit of a more personal form of artistic expression; stating, "I felt that I could do good painting and that I was selling myself cheap."

Alston worked with August Savage at the Harlem Arts Workshop, and when the program required more space, he secured an additional facility at 306 W. 141st Street. The space became center for the Harlem art community and was simply known as "306". Alston became the supervisor of the Harlem Hospital Center Murals leading a staff of 35 artists and assistants and becoming the first African American project supervisor for the Federal Art Project. Alston was also the first African American to teach at both the museum of Modern Art and the Art Students League and, in 1969, to have been appointed the painter member of the Art Commission of the City of New York.

In 1950 the Metropolitan Museum of Art held its first exhibition of contemporary art. Along with nearly 4,000 other artists, Alston entered a painting for competition and was one of the few chosen for purchase. He considered this moment "an exoneration or certification... the thing that made me feel comfortable with my decision."

In that same year, the Art Students League selected Alston as their first African American instructor. By the mid-1950s the Metropolitan Museum, the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Butler Institute of Art and IBM housed his works in their permanent collections. During this period he also completed murals for the Museum of Natural History and the Abraham Lincoln High School in Brooklyn. In 1969 Alston was appointed a "painter member" of the New York City Art Commission, which approved all designs for city buildings and works of art on city property. He was the first African American to achieve this post.

Alston was influenced by Mexican muralists such as José Clemente Orozco, Diego Rivera, and David Alfaro Siqueiros, who all used murals to inspire people towards social activism. When Diego Rivera was painting his famous mural at Rockefeller Center, which was destroyed because of its political content, Alston would frequently visit the Mexican artist, communicating in French, their only common language. Both Rivera and Orozco visited Harlem several times in an effort to win support for black artists.

At various times in his career, Alston worked as a sculptor, a painter, a cartoonist, and a graphic illustrator in publishing. During World War II, he worked at the Office of War Information and Public Information, creating cartoons and posters to mobilize the black community to join in the American war effort. He taught at the City University of New York from 1970 to 1977. His work is in the permanent collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art, and the Detroit Institute of Arts.

Alston's artistic style defies simple categorization and definition. His works range from detailed drawings concerned with realism, depth and modeling to extreme abstraction concerned with simplicity, flatness and pure expression. His art always remained to him an outlet for personal expression and growth, unbound by the restrictions of one particular genre. To Alston, "The whole creative thing is one of exploration of new or different areas," and in "developing or exploring an idea until you've gotten out of it everything you can, and beyond that, looking for unexplored areas."

The diversity of Alston's style reflects influences ranging from Egyptian and Oceanic art to more contemporary artistic styles like Cubism and Abstract Expressionism. However, his figures characteristically maintain a sculpture like quality derived from his earlier studies in African sculpture. His subjects, however, were derived mainly from the experiences of his life and time. As such they deal with the toils and triumphs of African Americans in the decades of the 50's, 60's and 70's. Alston states, "As an artist . . . I am intensely interested in probing, exploring the problems of color, space and form, which challenge all contemporary painters. However, as a black American . . . I cannot but be sensitive and responsive in my painting to the injustice, the indignity, and the hypocrisy suffered by black citizens."

On April 27, 1977, Charles Alston died of cancer. His body of work seeks the universal artistic goal of aesthetically depicting the truth within the prism of his life experiences. In his words he tells us,

"Art is the pursuit of truth as an artist perceives it. It can also be a powerful and effective weapon in the struggle for human decency."