



Romare Bearden:  
Pittsburgh Memory, 1964  
Printed papers  
and graphite on board  
21.6 × 29.8 cm  
Private Collection

# Africa. The Art of a Continent Part II

Our morality is being newly curated at the moment. Our familiar worldview is undergoing a reorientation. One fascinating aspect of this development is the way artists and intellectuals of African descent are shaping the new parameters. Where does one begin with art that has African roots, in addition to Western influences? Already during the colonial period but increasingly after 1960, the Senegalese poet Léopold Sédar Senghor (1906-2001), who eventually became his country's president, spoke and wrote about an "esthétique négro-africaine". It was he who coined the term "Négritude," which was for a while popular both in Africa and in the West. In solidarity with Senghor, the poet Aimé Césaire defined "Négritude" in 1962 as a "fact" that "does not include racism, denial of Europe, nor exclusivity, but on the contrary, a fraternity with all men." The progressive forces of Africa hoped for a peaceful world community. **When Senghor opened a Picasso exhibition in Dakar in 1972, he urged viewers not to regard the artist as a colonial-minded patriarch but as an exemplary friend. That was a signal moment in the development of an artistic movement that was still in its beginnings, the "School of Dakar."** In the United States, the cultural history of people of African descent developed under far less favorable auspices. For a very long time, no wooden sculptures or "bronzes" from Benin could be seen. In 1619, the first Dutch slave ship landed. **Africans in the USA were allowed to sing and dance, but for several hundred years of captivity in labor camps and on plantations, they produced no paintings or sculptures.** In this context, the slave revolt in Suriname in 1790, when black guerrillas incised "stars" and "moons" on their shaved skulls with shards of glass, has legendary significance. But aside from that rebellious representation of "heavenly elements," American slaves possessed no visual art of their own. It was not until the rapidly growing migration of black people from the southern states to New York in the 1920s and the subsequent birth of the "Harlem Renaissance" that the visual arts of African-Americans became institutionalized. The most famous black painter of the time was Aaron Douglas (1899-1979). He had access to the most famous collector from Philadelphia, Albert Barnes, and he had studied with a Munich artist. The black philosopher Alain Locke prophesied a "New Negro Movement" in Harlem in the 1920s. **The writer Langston Hughes found in the word "Black" a keyword for a suddenly self-confident African American culture. "Black" served to amplify the meaning of "Negro" with expressive power. His verses from 1922 are famous: "Black as the night is black / Black like the depths of my Africa."** In the 1930s, in the wake of government commissions during the American economic crisis, the first photographs of emancipated blacks in the southern states were taken.

Augusta Savage (1900–1962) became the first woman to open an art school in Harlem. “Black Art” became a self-evident fact in Harlem, but one could sense that the often academic forms of painting and drawing that were otherwise prevalent in American art did not play a great role there. Even after 1945 there was no integration of black Americans in American museum collections or galleries. Instead, mainly in the southern states, the *Ku Klux Klan* continued to operate. **The brotherhood hoped for by Senghor in Senegal did not develop in America. Harlem remained a ghetto. Lynchings and violent attacks by police on unarmed black people, including women and youth, occurred daily.** In 1964, Jack Whitten (1939–2018), a black abstract painter from Alabama, created a small square painting, using black oil paint on newspaper, aluminum foil and a nylon stocking, which he titled “Birmingham.” It looks like a dark and cruel wound. The painting commemorates the 1963 bombing of a Baptist church in Birmingham, Alabama, in which four young African American women were killed. A little more than fifty years ago, there were also small steps towards recognition: a “World Festival of Black Art” opened in Dakar in 1966. Romare Bearden (1911–1988), who had been active since the 1930s and had been a student of George Grosz, helped organize a 1967 exhibition titled “The Evolution of Afro-American Artists: 1800–1950” at the *City University of New York*. With his collages, he was the first black artist in the USA who was able to make a living from his work. Raymond Saunders, a black painter from Oakland, wrote a sentence that was fraught with meaning: “Black is a color” – to which, in 1967, he added “I am color blind.” He was refusing to play the role of victim in the midst of the strongly politicized society of that time: “Art projects beyond race and color; beyond America. It is universal, and Americans – black, white or whatever – have no exclusive rights on it.” A year later, the *Studio Museum* in Harlem, which is still in operation today, opened. In 1970 a “Black Art” exhibition at the *Museum of Fine Arts* in Boston was for the first time curated by a black man, Edmund B. Gaither. **The hope was for wide social recognition of the achievements of black artists. Today such recognition is taken for granted, indeed it is particularly strong. But the lynching and killing continues.** George Floyd died only a year ago. The writer Claudia Rankine from Kingston, Jamaica, wrote with indignation and horror at the end of 2020, “Dead blacks are a part of normal life here.” “Antiblack racism is in the culture.” The black artist Glenn Ligon, who recently opened the gloomy and at the same time stirring New York exhibition “Grief and Grievance” in collaboration with the late Nigerian curator and writer Okwui Enwezor, wrote laconically: “Antiblackness did not vanish after the end of the Civil War; it evolved.” Visual art by black artists, not just music and dance, has achieved million-dollar sales in the double-digit range since 2019. But it will take years until the nearly unquenchable grief over the brutal, life-destroying treatment of people of color, whether from Africa, the Caribbean, the American South or the Midwest, is overcome.

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