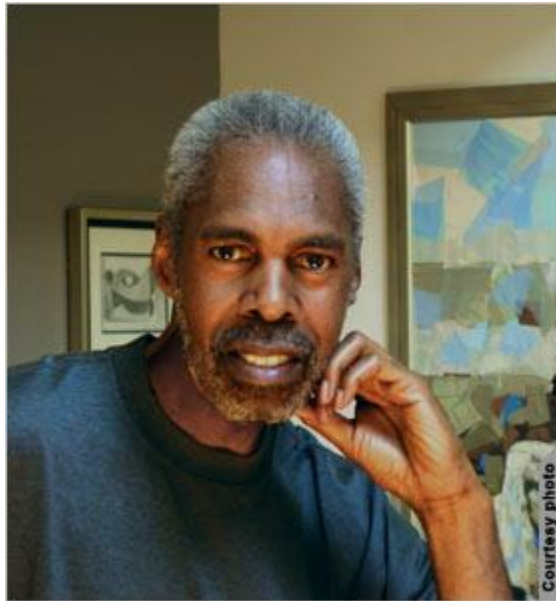


15 February 2011

## A Journey, Through Art, on the Underground Railroad



Artist Joseph Holston

By Jacob Comenetz  
Special Correspondent

Washington — In November 2010, Joseph Holston's *Color in Freedom: Journey Along the Underground Railroad* traveled to Geneva, where the U.S. Mission to the United Nations sponsored its presentation. Sharon Holston, the artist's wife, recalls the opening, which coincided with the United States' first presentation before the Human Rights Commission. "I believe it was important to show the world that the U.S. is not afraid to talk about a dark chapter in its past and to be proud of its current human rights record," she said.

Growing up in the Maryland suburbs of Washington during the 1950s and '60s, Joseph Holston visited the National Gallery of Art as often as he could. The budding artist, during his high school years, when he studied commercial art, gathered inspiration from the galleries of Rembrandts and Renoirs. But in his visits to the museum, Holston realized something was missing. None of the art he saw reflected the African-American experience.

"I felt that African Americans had to have a voice through art," he said. "And that was one of the reasons why I committed myself to creating art based on African-American subjects."

Fast-forward to 2005. Holston, now an established fine artist, attended a brainstorming session at the University of Maryland University College (UMUC), where he had previously held two exhibitions. His representative suggested a series of artworks "based on the idea of color and freedom and the Underground Railroad." Upon returning home, Holston realized the

immensity of the challenge before him. Though familiar with the basic history of the Underground Railroad — the network of people, black and white, who helped slaves escape from the South to the North or to Canada before and during the Civil War — he would have just six months to complete 50 images. This was not nearly enough time to research the period as a historian would.

Rather than attempt a literal depiction of historical events surrounding the informal network of routes and safe houses used by many escaping slaves, Holston decided to approach the project as a storyteller. Like some of the artists he counts as influences — Pablo Picasso, the Spanish founder of the cubist movement; Jacob Lawrence, an African-American artist who embraced cubism; and Romare Bearden, an African-American artist perhaps best known for his collages — Holston would focus on using color to convey emotions. Inspired by “the sensitivity and the peaks and valleys of classical music,” he would give his series of paintings “movements,” like a symphony, each telling a different chapter of the slave’s long flight to freedom.

The four movements in Holston’s *Color in Freedom* series go beyond the conventional understanding of the Underground Railroad as a historical episode lasting from the 1830s to the fiery outbreak of war in 1861. They do not depict specific people associated with the movement. Rather, they convey a broader narrative that begins prior to enslavement in Africa, moves through the centuries of plantation life, explores the paradigm of escape and concludes with a crescendo representing the joy of freedom.

To meet his deadline, Holston locked himself in his studio in Takoma Park, Maryland, for weeks at a time, emerging only on Friday nights to have dinner with his wife. “For me it was quite a journey that I had to go through,” he said. As he worked on the paintings, he listened to classical music, but imagined himself experiencing the fear of the slave. “I was more or less a prisoner in my studio recreating this dark period of history.” As he moved through the movements, he added light to many of the paintings, even the “dark” ones, as a metaphor for hope.

Upon completing the series, in November 2008, the [Color in Freedom exhibition](#) (described on the UMUC website) opened with a symposium at UMUC. In 2009, in cooperation with the nonprofit group International Arts & Artists, the exhibition began a tour of the United States, from Iowa, to Texas, to Missouri and Ohio. The exhibition continues to tour the United States in 2011.

While visiting Geneva for the opening, Holston spoke to several school groups, from elementary through high school. Though the exhibition deals

with a difficult strand of American history, the universal language of color and music makes it accessible to all, he said. "You don't have to be a runaway slave to understand what is really happening. If you're a human being, you should be able to relate to it and have a sensitive spot somewhere in your heart that can relate. That's what I wanted to do," Holston said. "Speak to all."

(This is a product of the Bureau of International Information Programs, U.S. Department of State. Web site: <http://www.america.gov>)