

MEMORIES & INSPIRATION

The Kerry and C. Betty Davis
Collection of African American Art



TRAVELING EXHIBITION SERVICE

IA&A

INTERNATIONAL
ARTS AND ARTISTS

A PHILOSOPHY OF ART, COLLECTING, AND LIFE

The traveling exhibition *Memories & Inspiration: The Kerry and C. Betty Davis Collection of African American Art* presents sixty-seven selected works from a body of art amassed over thirty-five years by an ordinary working-class couple. Often choosing artworks over material items and other creature comforts, Kerry, a retired mailman, and Betty, a former television news producer, have opted instead to live with drawings, paintings, prints, and sculpture as their principal luxuries.

While their stated intention to “preserve cultural memories and provide their community with a source of inspiration” are goals shared by most art enthusiasts, Kerry and Betty do not search exclusively for well-known and/or documented artists, keeping in mind “the importance of gathering and preserving a spectrum of approaches to the black image in order to console the psyche and contribute to a more authentic articulation of the self.” To this end, the Davises continue to be students of the visual arts through visits to galleries and museums and through their voracious reading of exhibition catalogues, artist monographs, books, and online data about artists, art genres, mediums, and history.

The Davis Collection has evolved considerably over the years, as its owners went from sifting through entries posted on various auction sites to visiting artists in their studios, dropping by galleries, trading with other collectors, going to estate sales, and receiving artworks from artists as gifts. The result is an eclectic gathering of pieces crossing different mediums, subjects, and styles by a group of artists of the African Diaspora who—in terms of training, experience, and expression—are singularly diverse but unified in their use of cultural and historical narratives. As their collection has grown, so has the Davises’ storehouse of memories of discovering new works of art, building friendships with artists, and conversing with museum professionals and other collectors in their home. They have also continued to expose their collection to family, friends, and church members who, while receptive to the fine arts, are unlikely to visit such local institutions as the High Museum of Art in Atlanta—prompting the artist Leon Nathaniel Hicks to refer to their residence as “a museum in a home.”



1. Michael Ellison, *Mickey Dees*, 1987, woodcut. Photograph by Reis Birdwhistell.



ASPECTS OF THE DAVIS COLLECTION: EXPERIENCES AND REMEMBRANCE



Kerry Davis often chooses pieces that relate to him personally. Memories of the rural lifestyle experienced by his Georgia-bred relatives, such as the common use of outhouses and the sight of weathered shotgun houses along the country roads, were key to the appeal of Beverly Buchanan's brightly-colored, acrylic paint on foam-board sculpture *Shack with Chair* (1989). Buchanan, a Guggenheim Foundation Fellow and Pollock-Krasner Foundation award recipient, translated aspects of her own Southern upbringing into vivid explorations of Southern architecture, housing, and ethnicity.

Having trained as a carpenter after military service, Davis related easily to Jacob Lawrence's *Builders series*, specifically the graphite drawing #8. In this work, one of two workers holds a wooden plank, while the primary tool of a carpenter—a hammer—hangs from his work pants. The other man (probably a carpenter assistant) kneels and rummages through a tool box. The series uses images of carpenters, cabinetmakers, bricklayers, and construction workers to illuminate aspects of the human condition, as well as concepts about American culture, hope, persistence, and the shared responsibility for transforming society—all ideas that intrigue Davis.

Another source of inspiration for Davis was the Harmon Foundation's annual artists award program. Initiated in 1926 by real estate mogul William E. Harmon (1862–1928), who set up the foundation in 1922, the William E. Harmon Foundation Award for Distinguished Achievement among Negroes promoted the work and talent of black artists at a time when Jim Crow segregation was pervasive in American society and African Americans were excluded from the general art world landscape. For seven years, until the project's conclusion in 1933, the award and its related exhibition threw a spotlight on the work of numerous African American artists who might not otherwise have found a wide audience. The Davis Collection boasts several works by Harmon Foundation Award winners, including Palmer Cole Hayden (1890–1973), a WWI army veteran, janitor, and self-taught painter; and Hale Aspacio Woodruff (1900–1980), a professor of art at Spelman College and New York University, who established the art program in the Atlanta University Center and founded the Atlanta University Art Annuals (1942–1970).

2. Beverly Buchanan, *Shack with Chair*, 1989, foam board. Photograph by Gregory Staley. © 2018 Jane Bridges.
3. Claude Clark, *Self Determination*, 1969, oil on board. Photograph by Reis Birdwhistell.



3

The Davises' fascination with African American sculpture, particularly its complex relationship to traditional African art, can be seen in expressive bronze works such as Elizabeth Catlett's stylized but tender *Mother and Child* (c. 1978) and William Ellsworth Artis's *Michael* (contemporary cast from c. 1950 mold). And it is natural that Kerry Davis, who built much of his collection on a postman's salary, should respond to the dignity and grace of Larry Walker's assemblage *Postman*, a sculptural tribute to the American postal worker and wage-earner. A sculptor and printmaker, Elizabeth Catlett (1915–2012) was one of the first African American MFA graduates from the University of Iowa. She later honed her social-realist sensibilities at Taller de Grafica print studio in Mexico, where she eventually took up residence and raised her family as a Mexican citizen. William Ellsworth Artis (1914–1977) was nineteen when he was featured in the 1933 Harmon Foundation short film *The Negro and Art*. A student at the Augusta Savage Studios in the early 1930s, Artis received the John Hope sculpture prize for *Head of a Girl* (1933), a work that was exhibited at the Art Students League later that year. More recently, in 2016, the artist and educator Larry Walker (b. 1935) added to an already illustrious exhibition record with an extraordinary solo show at Sikkema Jenkins & Co. Gallery in New York, which was organized by his daughter, the artist Kara Elizabeth Walker (b. 1969).

I have met quite a few artists along my journey as a collector. Some became not only close friends but great teachers as well. It became my practice to engage artists whenever possible: who better could explain their work?

—Kerry Davis

Calvin Waller Burnett's large colored-pencil drawing *Kids Playing Race Riot* (1945) resonated with the Davises' own childhood memories and with their recollections of raising their children. Burnett (1921–2007) was a master draftsman and illustrator who taught for over 30 years at the Massachusetts College of Art, exhibited frequently in the Atlanta University Art Annuals from 1944 to 1970, and has works in the permanent collections of numerous important museums.

Images of struggle, courage, dignity, and triumph over adversity are central to the concerns of many artists, including Charles Wilbert White (1918–1979), James C. McMillan (b. 1925), and Claude Clark (1913–2001). These heartfelt themes figured significantly in the Davises' acquisition of White's etching *Lilly C* (1973), McMillan's oil painting *Ole Jesse's Legacy* (1961), and Clark's painting *Self Determination* (1969). White was among the most prolific and respected draftsmen of his time, noted for his sensitive drawings, prints, and paintings—all steeped in cultural history, biography, and evocative portraiture, of which the central female figure of *Lilly C* is a luminous example. McMillan, a retired art professor, and the first African American to attend Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture (in the late 1940s), depicts four brown humanoid figures simultaneously pushing and pulling a rock-filled wagon in *Ole Jesse's Legacy*—a jab at the bombastic North Carolina ideologue Senator Jesse Helms. Clark's painting *Self Determination* features two black hands wielding a mallet and chisel to break the shackles from two opposite-placed black wrists with downward facing fists. A Philadelphia WPA artist and professor of art at numerous colleges, Clark was influenced by the French Expressionist imagery he saw while studying at the Barnes Foundation (1939–1944) with his good friend Albert Barnes.

As the Davises have continued to build their collection, they have befriended many of the artists of the works, and remain in contact with them to this day. Personal connections to artworks and the people who create them can be all-important to collectors who want their art to share a connection beyond that of style, medium, and subject matter; the vast eclecticism of the Davis Collection hints at the breadth of their friendships and interests, which include non-objective works of bold abstraction. One of these, *Heliocentric*, by the painter and printmaker Mildred Thompson (1936–2003), is a standout in the collection. A musician, photographer, and writer as well as artist, and a close friend of Kerry and Betty, Thompson is known for her artistic visions, which juxtapose and intertwine music, physics, and a host of other disciplines in colorful, flowing patterns.



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4. William J. Anderson, *Joanne by the Window*, 1986, silver gelatin photograph. Photograph by Reis Birdwhistell.
 5. Charles White, *Lilly C.*, 1973, etching. Photograph by Gregory Staley. © 2018 The Charles White Archives.



5

Ron Adams was truly a master printmaker and taught me about print mediums and how to discern quality prints. I also had the experience of pulling an etching with his guidance. Ron pulled prints for many notable artists, including Charles White, who was one of his friends. We had many conversations over White's etching Lilly C.

—Kerry Davis

Another frequent visitor to the Davises' "museum in a home" is Leon Nathaniel Hicks (b. 1933). A classical engraver and retired art professor, Hicks received much attention early in his career due to his involvement in the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s, where he focused his innovative talents on images of self-discovery and social consciousness. By the late 1970s, Hicks's style had shifted to engraved images of autonomous forms, and by the 1980s had evolved into computer graphics of elegant abstractions, exemplified in the panels of his epic *Virtualscape* (1993–1995) installation, one of which is in the Davis Collection.

Sam Gilliam (b. 1933), Norman W. Lewis (1909–1979), and Alma Woodsey Thomas (1891–1978) are three artists in the Davis Collection whose work contributed boldly to the trajectory of twentieth-century painting in America. Around 1945, Norman W. Lewis moved from abstract figuration to remarkable new works incorporating European modernist qualities, which heralded the emergence of Color Field painting in the US. These early "black paintings" served as prelude to his even more conceptual works, which experimented both with the expressive powers of color and with the implications of color as form, as seen in Lewis's *Untitled* (1961). An important development in Color Field painting was the Washington Color School, which flourished from the late 1950s to the 1960s. Both Sam Gilliam and Alma Woodsey Thomas have been associated with that movement. Thomas, whose *Untitled* watercolor from 1961 is in the Davis Collection, made her mark in the art world with a unique expressionist style that was described by New York art critic Holland Cotter as "forward-looking without being radical; post-racial but also race-conscious." Gilliam's *Untitled* (1974), an oil and acrylic on rice paper, is a jazz-influenced abstract piece. He first won acclaim in 1965 for his innovative, unsupported "drape paintings," which blurred the lines between painting and sculpture, and whose installation process added an element of performance to their dynamic properties.

Remarking on the stylistic and emotional richness of the Davis Collection as a whole, former Clark Atlanta University museum director Tina Dunkley observed, "In their rapture of appreciating the courageous acts of visual artists, Kerry and C. Betty Davis have created a cultural oasis in which their community can recognize, inform and celebrate themselves."

Mildred Thompson lived in Atlanta, so I visited her often. Her work is beautiful, and I gained a greater appreciation for it as she explained its meaning. She often spoke of form, composition, and color. I think what really solidified our relationship was the fact that she played the blues. After work, I had a standing invitation to sit in on her practice sessions.

—Kerry Davis

6. William Ellsworth Artis, *Michael*, 2002, bronze.
Photograph by Gregory Staley.



SELECTED ARTIST BIOGRAPHIES





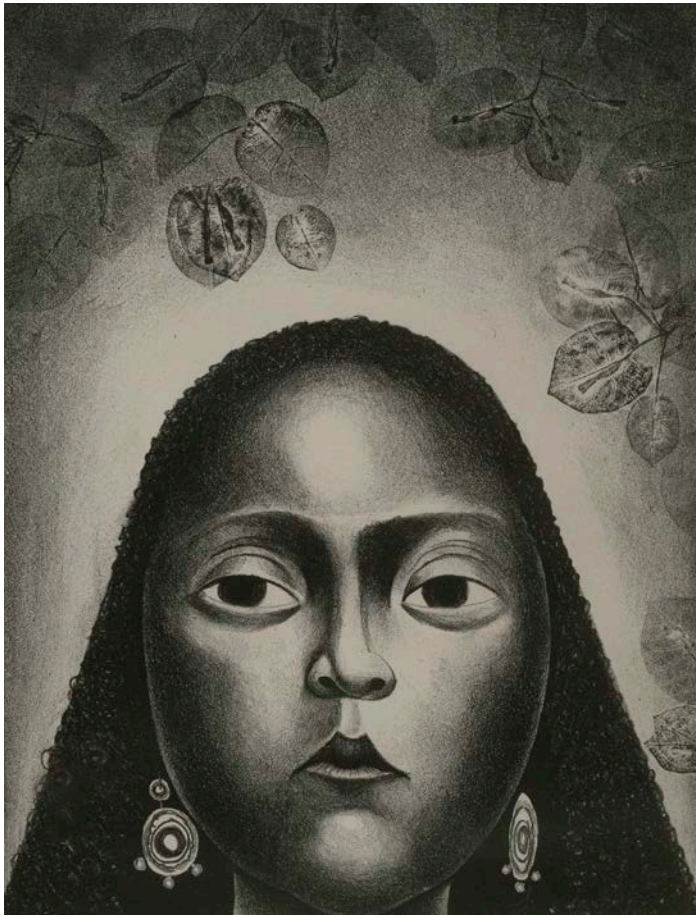
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Romare Howard Bearden (1911–1988) was a collagist, painter, musician, writer, and arts activist whose collages, watercolors, and photomontages captured much of the vitality and color of cultural life in Mecklenburg County (NC), Pittsburgh (PA), and New York City. Born in Charlotte, North Carolina, he studied both at Lincoln University in Pennsylvania and at Boston University before earning a degree in education from New York University, where he also took extensive courses in art. He studied drawing with George Grosz at the Art Students League in New York, and later attended the Sorbonne in Paris. He was a member of both the Harlem Artist Guild and the 306 Group, and a founder of the artist collective Spiral. After working three decades as a social worker in New York City during the day and as a successful artist on nights and weekends, he was able by the mid-1960s to make art his main occupation.

Bearden's work is in the permanent collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York, NY), Museum of Modern Art (New York, NY), Whitney Museum of American Art (New York, NY), Philadelphia Museum of Art (PA), Museum of Fine Arts (Boston, MA), Newark Museum of Art (NJ), High Museum of Art (Atlanta, GA), and The Studio Museum in Harlem (New York, NY), among others.

7. Yashua Klos, *Coby*, 2003, graphite. Photograph by Gregory Staley. © 2018 Yashua Klos.

8. Romare Bearden, *Record Date*, 1979, monotype, 29.5 x 41.5. Photograph by Gregory Staley. © Romare Bearden Foundation/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY.



9

(Alice) Elizabeth Catlett (Mora) (1915–2012) was a sculptor, printmaker, educator, and activist whose work expressed her lifelong interest in social and political issues in the United States and Mexico, particularly as relates to gender, race, and class. Born in Washington, DC, she was based in Mexico throughout most of her career. Catlett received her bachelor of science from Howard University in 1937 and her master of fine arts from the University of Iowa in 1940, where she studied with Grant Wood.

Catlett became a resident of Mexico in 1947, and was a professor of sculpture at the University of Mexico in the School of Fine Arts from 1958 to 1976, making her the first female professor of sculpture at the institution and the first woman to chair the sculpture department. Her political and social activism on behalf of women, the poor, and the disenfranchised intensified during her years at the university, and she became a Mexican citizen in 1962.

Her work is in the permanent collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York, NY), Museum of Modern Art (New York, NY), Baltimore Museum of Art (MD), National Museum of American Art (Washington, DC), Wadsworth Atheneum (Hartford, CT), High Museum of Art (Atlanta, GA), New Orleans Museum of Art (LA), Studio Museum in Harlem (New York, NY), Museo de Arte Moderno (Mexico City), National Museum in Prague, and Cleveland Museum of Art (OH), among others.

9. Elizabeth Catlett, *Prissy*, 1979, lithograph, 18 x 15. Photograph by Gregory Staley. © Catlett Mora Family Trust/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY.



10

Ernest T. Crichtlow (1914–2005), born in Brooklyn, New York, was a painter, illustrator, and graphic artist whose early interest in art was encouraged when a neighborhood minister commissioned him and a close friend to paint a black Jesus on a window shade. Subsequently, his high school teachers helped to fund a scholarship for him to attend the School of Commercial Illustrating and Advertising Art in Manhattan. He next attended the Art Students League, where he was exposed to the latest approaches to modernism and abstraction. After meeting Augusta Savage, he took classes at her school, alongside Jacob Lawrence, Gwendolyn Knight, and Norman Lewis, and soon joined the WPA's Federal Art Project (FAP), where he created *Lovers* (1938), his most famous work.

In 1958, Crichtlow founded the Fulton Art Fair with Jacob Lawrence, Tom Feelings, and Virginia Keys, and in 1969 assisted Romare Bearden and Norman Lewis in establishing Cinque Gallery,

a New York downtown venue where African Americans could display their art. In 1980, Crichtlow, along with his colleagues Jacob Lawrence, Lois Mailou Jones, and Archibald Motley, Jr., were among ten artists honored at a White House reception hosted by President Jimmy Carter for the National Conference of Artists.

Crichtlow's work is in the collections of the Museum of Fine Arts (Boston, MA), City College of New York (NY), Institute of Contemporary Art (Boston, MA), Newark Museum (NJ), The Paul R. Jones Collection at the University of Delaware (Newark, DE), Clark Atlanta University Art Museum (GA), and Smith College Museum of Art (Northampton, MA).

10. Ernest Crichtlow, *Waiting*, 1968, lithograph. Photograph by Gregory Staley.



11

Sam Gilliam (b. 1933) is a painter and educator born in Tupelo, Mississippi. He studied at the University of Louisville, receiving his bachelor of arts in 1955 and his master of arts in 1961, and went on to teach painting at the Maryland Institute College of Art in Baltimore and at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, DC.

His work is in the permanent collections of the Museum of Modern Art (New York, NY) and the Whitney Museum of American Art (New York, NY), the National Gallery of Art (Washington, DC), Baltimore Museum of Art (MD), Carnegie Institute (Pittsburgh, PA), Corcoran Gallery of Art (Washington, DC), Howard University Art Gallery (Washington, DC), Phillips Collection (Washington, DC), Art Institute (Chicago, IL), Walker Art Center (Minneapolis, MN), Boymans van Beuningen Museum (Rotterdam, the Netherlands), and the Tate Gallery (London), among others.

11. Sam Gilliam, *Untitled*, 1974, oil acrylic on rice paper. Photograph by Gregory Staley. Courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles, CA.



12

Loïs Mailou Jones (1905–1998), born in Boston, Massachusetts, was a painter, illustrator, and educator based in Washington, DC, with a second home and studio in Haiti following her marriage to Haitian artist Vergniaud Pierre-Noël. She received a diploma from the Boston Museum School of Fine Arts in 1927, certificates from Boston Normal Art School (currently Massachusetts College of Art) and the Académie Julian in Paris, a bachelor of arts from Howard University in Washington, DC, in 1945, and a certificate from Académie de la Grande Chaumière in Paris in 1962. She was professor of design and watercolor at Howard University from 1930 to 1977.

Her work is in the permanent collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York, NY), Brooklyn Museum of Art (NY), Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden (Washington, DC), Museum of Fine Arts (Boston, MA), Phillips Collection (Washington, DC), National Museum of Women in

the Arts (Washington, DC), Smithsonian American Art Museum (Washington, DC), Wadsworth Atheneum (Hartford, CT), University of Punjab (Pakistan), Studio Museum in Harlem (New York, NY), Walker Art Museum at Bowdoin College (Brunswick, ME), Museum of the National Center of Afro American Artists (Roxbury, MA), Milwaukee Museum of Art (WI), Le Musée d'Art Haitien (Port-au-Prince), Clark Atlanta University Art Gallery (GA), and the Howard University Gallery of Art (Washington, DC), among others.

12. Loïs Mailou Jones, *St. Michelle, France*, 1958, watercolor. Photograph by Gregory Staley. © 2018 Loïs Mailou Jones Pierre-Noël Trust.



13

Gordon Parks (1912–2006), born Gordon Roger Alexander Buchanan Parks on November 30, 1912, in Fort Scott, Kansas, was an author, photographer, and film director who famously documented African American life. The son of a tenant farmer, Parks grew up in poverty in the American Midwest. In 1938, he bought a camera and quickly made a name for himself as a portrait and fashion photographer. After moving to Chicago, he began chronicling life in the city's impoverished South Side. These photographs led to a Julius Rosenwald Fellowship, and in 1942 he became a photographer at the Farm Security Administration (FSA). While with the FSA, he took perhaps his best-known photograph, *American Gothic*, which featured an African American cleaning woman holding a mop and broom while standing in front of an American flag.

In 1948, Parks became a staff photographer for *Life* magazine, the first African American to hold that position. Parks, who remained with the magazine until 1972, became known for his vivid portrayals of ghetto life, black nationalists, and the civil rights movement. His acclaimed photo-essay about a child from a Brazilian slum was expanded into a television documentary (1962) and adapted into a book with poetry (1978), both titled *Flavio*. Parks also was noted for his intimate portraits of such public figures as Ingrid Bergman, Barbra Streisand, Gloria Vanderbilt, and Muhammad Ali.

13. Gordon Parks, *Welders*, 1943, silver gelatin photograph. Photograph by Reis Birdwhistell. © The Gordon Parks Foundation.



14

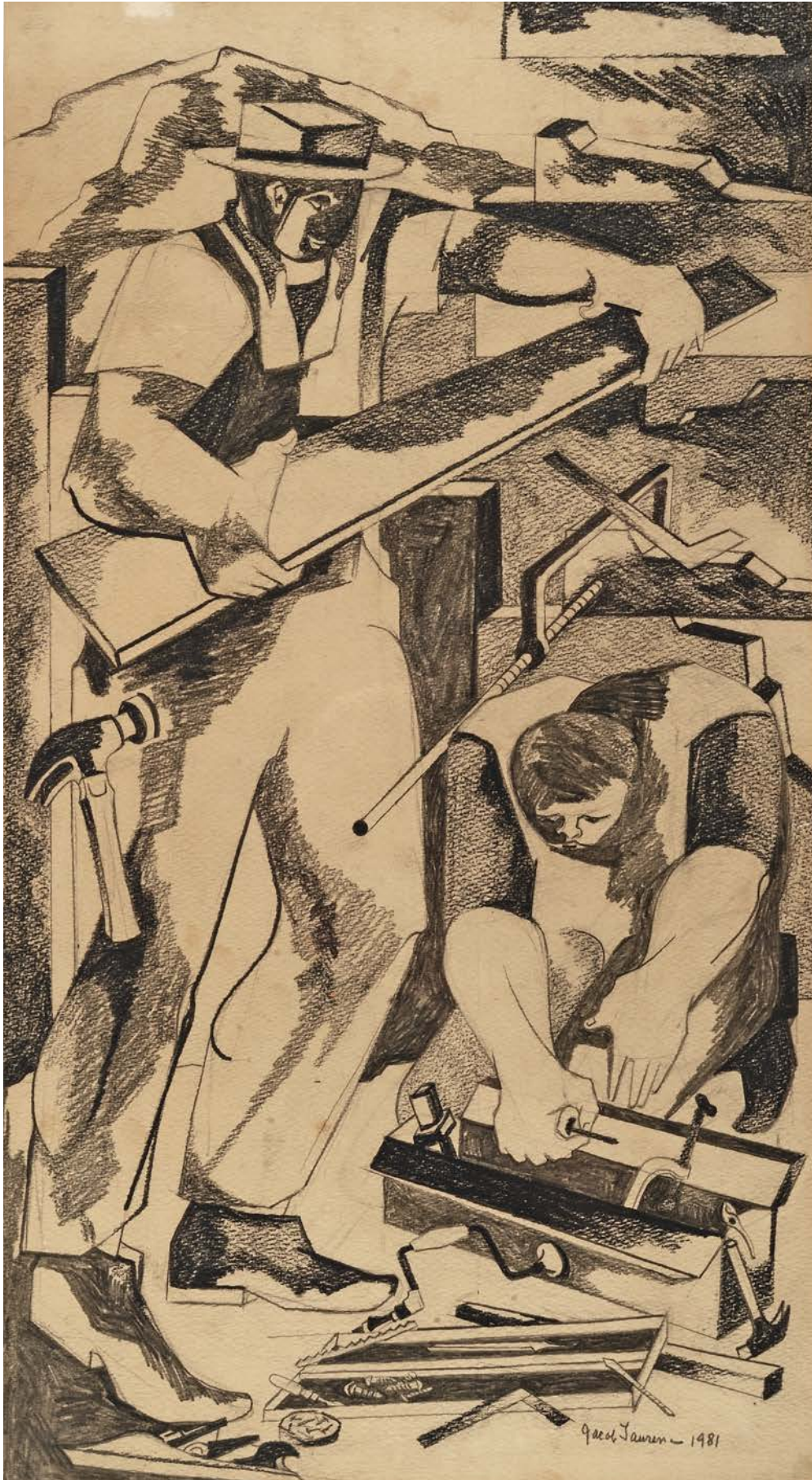
Alma Woodsey Thomas (1891–1978) was an important painter in the Color Field movement and one of the pioneers of African American abstraction. Born in Columbus, Georgia, she relocated to Washington, DC, with her family in 1907.

She received her bachelor of science in 1924, becoming the first fine arts graduate from Howard University, where she studied with Lois Mailou Jones and program founder James V. Herring. She earned her master's in art education from Columbia University in 1934, and from 1950 to 1960 studied painting at American University under Jacob Kainen. Concurrently, Thomas taught at Shaw Junior High School from 1934 until 1960, when she began painting full time.

Permanent collections featuring her work include the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden (Washington, DC), Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York, NY), Phillips Collection (Washington, DC), Baltimore Museum of Art (MD), National Museum of Women in the Arts (Washington, DC), and the Columbus Museum (GA).

14. Alma Thomas, *Untitled*, 1961, watercolor. Photograph by Gregory Staley.

JACOB LAWRENCE (1917–2000)



In the mid-'80s, it was the narrative paintings by Jacob Lawrence that captured my eye, and I considered it my first major purchase when I was able to acquire the silkscreen print The General from the Toussaint L'Ouverture Series. To this day, it is my favorite print in the collection. However, a few years later, I was able to acquire my overall favorite work in the collection, Builder Series #8. It not only satisfied having a quality drawing, which is my favorite art medium, but also appealed to my experiences as a carpenter and handyman.

—Kerry Davis

Jacob Armstead Lawrence (1917–2000) was a celebrated painter and educator born in Atlantic City, New Jersey, who relocated to Harlem in his early teens and later settled in Seattle, where he took a position at the University of Washington. He studied at the Art Workshop (1932–1939) under Charles Alston and Henry Bannarn, and at American Artists School (1937–1939). At age 25, Lawrence won national acclaim for his 60-panel *Migration Series*, a graphic account of the African American “Great Migration” from the rural South to the urban North. Painted on cardboard, the series of stark yet flamboyant images introduced Lawrence’s vivid “dynamic cubism” style to the American art scene.

A member of the Artists Equity Association and the National Institute of Arts and Letters, Lawrence received a Julius Rosenwald Foundation Fellowship in 1940, 1941, and 1942; a Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Fellowship in 1946; the Art Institute of Chicago Norman Wait Harris Medal (1948); a National Institute of Arts and Letters grant in 1953; a Chapelbrook Foundation Fellowship in 1954; the United Nations Building Mural

Competition First Prize (shared with Stuart Davis) in 1955; a Metropolitan Museum of Art Artists for Victory Purchase Prize in 1942; and the Brooklyn Society of Artists First Prize in 1948, among many other honors.

His paintings of the American experience as seen through the eyes of African Americans are found in the permanent collections of the Museum of Modern Art (New York, NY), the Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York, NY), the Phillips Collection (Washington, DC), Whitney Museum of American Art (New York, NY), Albright-Knox Gallery in Buffalo (NY), the Baltimore Museum of Art (MD), the Brooklyn Museum of Art (New York, NY), Rhode Island School of Design (Providence), Virginia Museum of Fine Arts (Richmond), the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden (Washington, DC), Addison Gallery of American Art at Phillips Academy (Andover, MD); and Clark Atlanta University (GA), among others.

15. Jacob Lawrence, *Builder Series #8*, 1981, graphite. Photograph by Gregory Staley. © 2017 The Jacob and Gwendolyn Knight Lawrence Foundation, Seattle/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

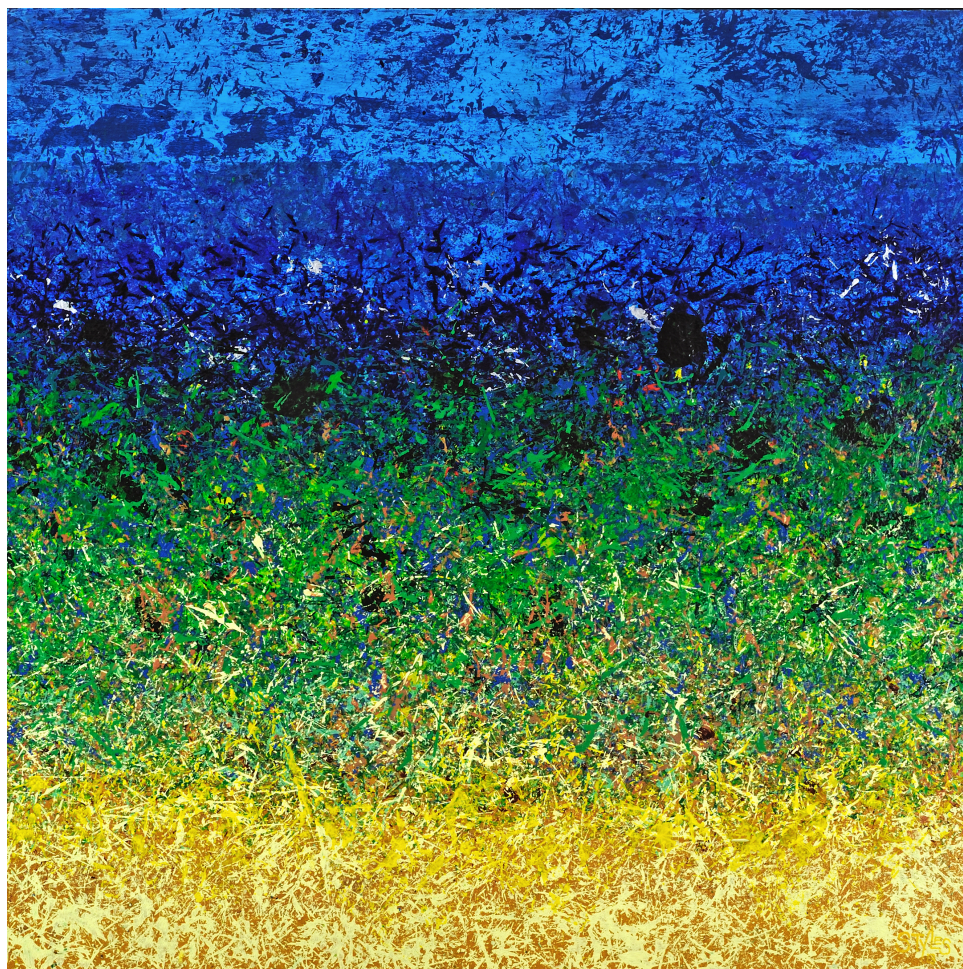
ABOUT THE COLLECTORS



Kerry Davis, a native of Atlanta, Georgia, is a former sergeant of the United States Air Force, a retired carrier with the United States Postal Service, and an ordained deacon. He began collecting in the mid-1980s in partnership with his wife, Betty, who shared his passion for art. Begun originally with the modest aim of enhancing the interior decor of their mid-century split-level home in suburban Atlanta, The Davis' Collection has grown to over 300 works by some of the most distinguished African American artists of the twentieth century.

Inspired by previous generations of African American art collectors, who understood the importance of preserving cultural expression, memory, and imagery, Davis has sought to contribute to this legacy and be a source of inspiration for others in the community. The Davis residence—dubbed an “In-Home Museum” by visiting neighbors, parishioners, and friends—serves as a meeting place and cultural hub for artists, collectors, and art enthusiasts. Kerry and Betty have two children and one granddaughter.

16. Larry Walker, *Postman*, 2013, assemblage. Photograph by Reis Birdwhistell. © 2018 Larry Walker.



Front Sedrick Huckaby, *She Wore Her Family's Quilt*, 2015, oil on canvas. Photograph by Gregory Staley.
Back Freddie Styles, *Kerry's Painting*, 2015, Oil on canvas, Photograph by Gregory Staley, © Freddie Styles

EXHIBITION SPECIFICATIONS

Number of Works

67 works of art, including paintings, prints, drawings, photographs, sculptures, and mixed media

Organized by

Kerry and C. Betty Davis and
International Arts & Artists

Requirements

High security; 275-325 linear feet

Participation Fee

Please inquire

Shipping

IA&A makes all arrangements;
exhibitors pay outgoing shipping
costs within the contiguous U.S.

Booking Period

12 weeks

Tour

January 2020–December 2025

Contact

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