

Portraits of a People: Picturing African Americans in the Nineteenth Century

by Jeanne Schinto

From the foyer, even before you entered the exhibit, you could see one of the portraits through the doorway, a formal bust-length picture of an African-American in a chef's white toque and jacket. The label explained that the oil on linen composition is by Gilbert Stuart (1755-1828), and its title is *Presumed Portrait of George Washington's Cook*. The label added that the sitter, once believed to be a slave named Hercules who prepared meals for the Washington household at Mount Vernon and posed for Stuart's famed Athenaeum and Lansdowne portraits, may actually be someone else.

Whatever the man's true identity, he was portrayed by Stuart in his full, complex humanity, his uniform, skin color, and other physical attributes being only partial ingredients of the likeness. And like any great portrait, it acts as a mirror capable of showing us aspects of ourselves.

The Stuart is among nearly 100 images in *Portraits of a People: Picturing African Americans in the Nineteenth Century*, organized by the Addison Gallery of American Art, Phillips Academy, Andover, Massachusetts, and curated by Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw, associate professor of art history at the University of Pennsylvania, who also wrote the catalog.

Before we met Shaw at the opening in Andover on January 27, she spoke to us by phone of her desire to create an exhibit of portraits of "named" African-Americans, each with a detailed personal history. Her aim, she said, was to provide a counterpoint to the generalized African-American figures in art that are much more familiar to many of us. The result of her efforts is an exhibit that deserves to be described as groundbreaking, overused word though it is.

No icons here, only individuals. For example, a barber who lived and worked in Bangor, Maine, in the 1820's and 1830's as a well-regarded member of the community was named Abraham Hanson. He was a good-humored man, according to local annals, and wore a high white collar and jewel-blue vest when he sat for Jeremiah Pearson Lucy (1800-1887).

Three young sisters in pretty dresses and pantaloons were named Eliza, Nellie, and Margaret Copeland. Daughters of a pawnbroker in Boston's North End, they were the subjects of a group portrait by William Matthew Prior (1806-1873). It's not a naturalistic painting; it's folk art. Stiffly, the girls grip their formulaic, gender-specific props—miniature book, bunch of cherries, bouquet. Still, their playfulness, teetering on the brink of mischievousness, comes through.

Then we saw Achille Lion, the mixed-race son of a wealthy Jewish merchant of New Orleans, who was painted by the man who probably was his stepfather, Jules Lion (1816-1860). This is actually a double portrait of Achille and his father, Asher Moses Nathan. The two are twinned with the same formal dress, serious expressions, and side-parted hair styles—and they're holding hands. It's an emotionally complicated picture, matching the complicated racial heritage that this father-son relationship represents.

When we asked Shaw about the genesis of her exhibit, she said that while at Stanford University, where she earned her Ph.D. in 2000, she wrote a number of seminar papers about portraits, including those depicting Edmonia Lewis, the first African-American to gain an international reputation as a sculptor. She also wrote about the silhouettes of Kara Walker, an African-American artist born in 1969. Shaw's work on Walker led her to 19th-century silhouette-maker Moses Williams, the one-time slave of Charles Willson Peale (1741-1827). Beginning in 1802, Williams operated the Peale Museum's physionotrace, the silhouette-making machine that was for years one of the museum's main attractions.

After learning what she could about the life and career of Williams, Shaw was inspired to explore image-making in the 19th century, a period she feels is "getting short shrift" by art history scholars in favor of 20th-century topics. Further, she said, "I wanted to study images that people rarely see. I wanted to study issues of media, to note what was available when, and how people used those media, and why. I'm very interested in the issue of an individual's choices about how he or she is portrayed."

Since African-Americans have so often not been in control of how they have been portrayed in art, it became Shaw's objective to find images of those who had been.

Besides the oil portraits, there are silhouettes, photographs, drawings, pastels, engravings, lithographs, and book frontispieces. Many were selected by Shaw from large, high-profile collections, including the Fogg Art Museum at Harvard University, the Library of Congress, the U.S. Department of State, and the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Others were found in far-flung places and in unlikely repositories for material of this kind.

The portrait presumed to be Washington's cook, for example, was lent by the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza in Madrid, Spain. A Portrait of a Gentleman, believed to be a cleric named Daniel Coker, by Joshua Johnson (active 1796-1824), came from the American Museum in Britain, Bath, England. A related portrait of another Coker family member by Johnson, the first recognized African-American artist, is owned and was lent by the Bowdoin College Museum of Art in Brunswick, Maine. A portrait by Rembrandt Peale (1778-1860), *Man in a Feathered Helmet*, who may be Moses Williams posing as a Hawaiian chief in scarlet headress and robes, is from the collection of the Bishop Museum in Honolulu.

Nineteenth-century oil portraits of African-American subjects are not plentiful, to be sure. Many more affluent middle-class European-American families could afford to hire portrait painters than could African-American ones. But the mechanically reproduced materials, even though more common, were no more easily gathered by curator Shaw. Institutions specifically charged with preserving the artifacts of the everyday lives of African-Americans have been in existence only within the last half century or so. Older, more traditional archives around the country may have relevant materials but often in storage, uncataloged, unstudied, undervalued, and forgotten.

Shaw discovered some of her eventual selections by way of happy accidents, while speaking about her topic to people at dinner parties and after lectures. She stumbled upon one at the Rhode Island School of Design Museum in Providence when she was in town for a Brown University football game. Most others, however, were found through the use of one of her primary research tools, the Image of the Black in Western Art Research Project and Photo Archive at Harvard, where scholars can access images and detailed descriptions of approximately 30,000 works of art. Shaw additionally credits the Harvard Antiquarian Society in Worcester, Massachusetts, which not only aided her research but also became a lender to the exhibit, providing, among other things, a silhouette tentatively identified as a posthumous likeness of slave poet Phillis Wheatley.

The frontispiece of Wheatley's *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (1773), lent by Wellesley College in Wellesley, Massachusetts, is one of the earliest objects in the exhibit and among the most significant. With the publication of her book, the 19-year-old author made literary history and is rightly portrayed with quill pen in hand and lost in thought—part of the literary world of her time—in spite of being owned by John and Susannah Wheatley of Boston.

The idea of the image was as radical as the image itself, Shaw pointed out in her catalog essay, because it represents the first instance of a colonial American woman of any race having her portrait printed along with her writings. And it set a trend. Other writers began to be portrayed in paintings and frontispieces in the same thoughtful pose.

Frederick Douglass and Sojourner Truth are two other celebrated African-Americans whose portraits are included in this exhibit, not solely because of their fame, but because they each understood the power of imagery and used it to further their causes and careers.

Douglass is thought to have sat for 74 different photographic portraits in his lifetime. Shaw chose three of them. She also selected a portrait engraving he used as the frontispiece of his autobiography and a depiction from the lithographed cover of his sheet music "The Fugitive's Song." Douglass always looks so self-possessed, authoritative, even a little stern in his portraits. Historians have documented that Douglass worked collaboratively with photographers and others to create the formidable self-image he wanted to project.

Sojourner Truth (known as Isabella Dumont before she gained her freedom and named herself) famously captioned her cartes de visite with this slogan: "I sell the shadow to support the substance." By the word "shadow," she meant, of course, the photographs, which show her as a prim, dignified matron minus any evidence of her former servitude. They were sold as souvenirs at her public appearances, providing her with a source of income. "In this manner," Shaw wrote, "the formerly enslaved woman was able to achieve an ironic sort of control over the sale of the representation of her selfhood."

Leaders of African-American churches who are pictured in this exhibit reveal a similarly sophisticated understanding of the power of mechanically reproduced images. The Reverend Richard Allen, a former slave who became founding bishop of the first African Methodist Episcopal Church, had his portrait engraved and reproduced by one of America's earliest lithographers, Peter S. Duval & Co. of Philadelphia. In the 1820's and 1830's, Shaw said, an "untold number" of these images with a pensive Allen pointing to a passage in an open Bible would have found their way into the homes of Allen's parishioners.

Hiram Rhodes Revels, who began his career as a minister and went on to become the first African-American member of the U.S. Senate, had his portrait painted by German-born artist Theodor Kaufmann (1814-c. 1900). It was then reproduced by the Boston firm of Louis Prang & Co., prominent dealers of chromolithography. The popularity of this image of the handsome Revels, who with his short beard and close-cropped hair looks uncannily contemporary, was due not only to Revels's celebrity but also to the scarcity of portraits that, in Shaw's word, "lionized" African-Americans.

The seat from Mississippi that Revels won in 1870 had been vacated nine years earlier by Jefferson Davis—an auspicious beginning—but Revels's political career was short. In 1871, he resigned to become president of Alcorn State University, Mississippi's first state college for African-Americans.

Three of the most affecting pieces in this exhibit are by Edward Mitchell Bannister (1828-1901). Known today chiefly as a landscape artist, Bannister early in his career made a living as a portrait painter, catering to middle-class African-Americans in Boston; he also worked as a photographer.

One Bannister portrait here was not painted for a paying customer; it's of the artist's wife, a successful hairdresser who owned her own business and supported her husband financially throughout their life together. Christiana Carteaux Bannister sits in a carved and upholstered Victorian chair, a fragile-looking purple vase at her elbow. She is dressed in salmon-colored flounces and a maroon velvet jacket with a bit of lace and red bow tied at her throat. But these flourishes of fashion are almost beside the point. What Bannister has captured in her face and clasped hands is strength, conviction, and a powerful will.

The portrait of Mrs. Bannister came to the exhibit by way of the collection of the Newport Art Museum by extended loan of the Rhode Island Black Heritage Society in trust of Bannister House in Providence. The Bannisters moved to Providence after the Civil War, finding Boston suddenly inhospitable to middle-class Blacks like themselves. Numbers of freed slaves had moved into the city, causing discord, resentment, and race riots. The Bannisters chose Providence because of the wife's family roots. It was fortuitous. The artist became part of the city's active artistic community, co-founding the Providence Art Club and later becoming an early board member and instructor at the Rhode Island School of Design.

Corrine Jennings of Kenkeleba Gallery, New York City, is a Providence native and told us that Bannister House used to be called the Home for Aged Colored Women. She said she knows this because she used to visit the place. "My mother took me there as a child to entertain when I misbehaved. It used to be that my grandmother's friends were there." She also knows the portrait better than most of us ever will. "You could borrow it, take it home."

Jennings lent the other two Bannister portraits in the exhibition, Dr. John Van Surley DeGrasse and Lucretia Cordelia DeGrasse, husband and wife in formal oval compositions—he with a big black beard and piercing eyes and she in soft pastels down to her bare shoulders. Jennings also lent two related portraits, Lucretia's mother, Margaret Gardner Howard, with William Matthew Prior and John's brother, Isaiah DeGrasse, by the African-American painter and printmaker Patrick Henry Reason (1817-1856). "I lent Gwendolyn a family," Jennings said with pride.

They have been in her possession for about ten years. Phoning around to places in New England, looking for more Bannister landscapes for her and her husband's collection, Jennings was off these instances in a Recognizing the name DeGrasse, she said, "I could barely contain myself." Dr. John DeGrasse, a noted Boston physician active in the abolitionist movement, became the first Black surgeon to serve in the Civil War. Even before that, the DeGrasse family was prominent. The doctor was Dr. He grandson of Count François Joseph Paul DeGrasse, who served in the French Navy and commanded a fleet of ships in the Caribbean against Britain during the American Revolutionary War.

Cartes de visite of Dr. DeGrasse (in his Civil War uniform) and his wife are displayed along with their portraits. They were made by Bannister, John A. Heard (active 1850-60's), and James Wallace Black (1825-1896), Black being the man who made a famous photograph of John Brown shortly before his raid on Harpers Ferry.

The exhibit includes numerous other fascinating small-format images. Our favorite is an ambrotype of Sergeant Henry Stewart, Company E, 54th Massachusetts Regiment, the first Black regiment organized in the North. The hand-tinted photo of the 19-year-old soldier was made in March 1863. It shows him standing at attention in Union blue, sword in hand—a picture of discipline and moral purpose. He died in battle six months later.

Henry Ossawa Tanner (1859-1937) is arguably the most important African-American artist whose work is in the exhibit. He was the first African-American artist to achieve international acclaim, and his paintings command high prices on the market today. The two by Tanner here are portraits of his parents. Bishop Benjamin Tucker Tanner is a 16-1/8" x 13-1/4" formal head-and-shoulders composition. He is dressed in clerical garb, including a black cap and wearing a cross on a chain around his neck. His gaze is indirect as though thinking or praying. It is a son's distanced rendering of a father who, as the story goes, apprenticed him to a friend to learn the milling business in order to discourage his interest in art.

The portrait of Sarah Elizabeth Miller Tanner, a full-length seated pose in profile against dramatic dark maroon drapes, is much larger (39 1/2" x 29 1/2") and much more lavishly rendered, it could be argued. But Tanner found in this subject something that goes beyond a son's feelings for his mother. The fan in her hand, her long dress, the shawl that acts as a kind of royal train, all contribute to an impression of poise and spiritual repose that illuminates and transcends this specific personality.

The exhibit, on view at the Addison through March 26, traveled to the Delaware Art Museum in Wilmington, where it may be seen from April 21 to July 17. It then goes to the Long Beach (California) Museum of Art from August 25 to November 26.

"A number of the images are too fragile to go out for months," said Shaw. Consequently, they will not appear in all three venues. Some substitutions will be made. For example, three pencil sketches of imprisoned Mendi of the Amistad, made by Connecticut artist William H. Townsend (1822-1851) while they awaited trial in New Haven, will be exchanged for three others. There are a total of 22 owned by their lender, the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

Not traveling (but pictured in the catalog) is the drawing of a sweet-faced pre-adolescent in pigtail, one of only two children Townsend painted. Named Margru (later Sarah Margru Kinson), she went on to study at Oberlin College in Oberlin, Ohio, then returned to Africa, where she lived out her life as a missionary in Sierra Leone.

The American Colonization Society was founded by both Blacks and Whites to relocate free African-Americans to the West African coast as an alternative to remaining in the United States after emancipation. The society would eventually send more than 13,000 to its colony, Liberia. The exhibit includes formal portraits of several early Liberian presidents. One was Joseph Jenkins Roberts, painted by Thomas Wilcox Sully (1811-1847), circa 1844. Roberts's skin tone is light yellowish beige—some would describe it as white. In fact, the catalog notes he was "more than seven-eighths white," an ironic detail that was "common knowledge" and frequently publicized during his lifetime.

The range of skin tones in all these galleries of portraits, the variety and individuality of features, including hair and bone structure, are testimony to the reality of America's history of mixed-race ancestry. Not until the late 19th and early 20th centuries did distorted, stereotyped images of African-Americans grow common—the Black collectibles of today. But earlier depictions by artists with nobler motives were often inaccurate too.

The opinion of Frederick Douglass on the subject of "negro" [sic] portraits, in the following passage from an 1849 issue of *The Liberator*, serves as an epigraph to one of Shaw's catalog essays:

"It seems to us next to impossible for white men to take likenesses of black men, without most grossly exaggerating their distinctive features," Douglass wrote. "...We have heard many white persons say that 'negroes look all alike,' and that they could not distinguish between them, and the reason is, they associate with the negro face, high cheek bones, distended nostril, depressed nose, thick lips, and retreating forehead. This theory, impressed strongly on the mind of an artist, exercises a powerful influence over his pencil, and very naturally leads him to distort and exaggerate those peculiarities, even when they scarcely exist in the original. This temptation to make the likeness of the negro rather than of the man, is very strong...There is the greatest variety of form and feature among us, and there is seldom one face to be found which has all the features usually attributed to the negro...."

Fair-minded Douglass called that perhaps artists of color would "not be more impartial than our white brothers, should we attempt to picture them. We should be as likely to get their lips too thin, noses too sharp and pinched up, their hair too lank and flaxen, and their faces altogether too cadaverous."

For more information about the Addison venue, call (978) 749-4015 or visit the Web site (www.addisongallery.org); for more information about the Delaware venue, call (302) 571-9590 or visit the Web site (www.delart.org); for more information about the Long Beach venue, call (562) 439-2119 or visit the Web site (www.lbma.org).