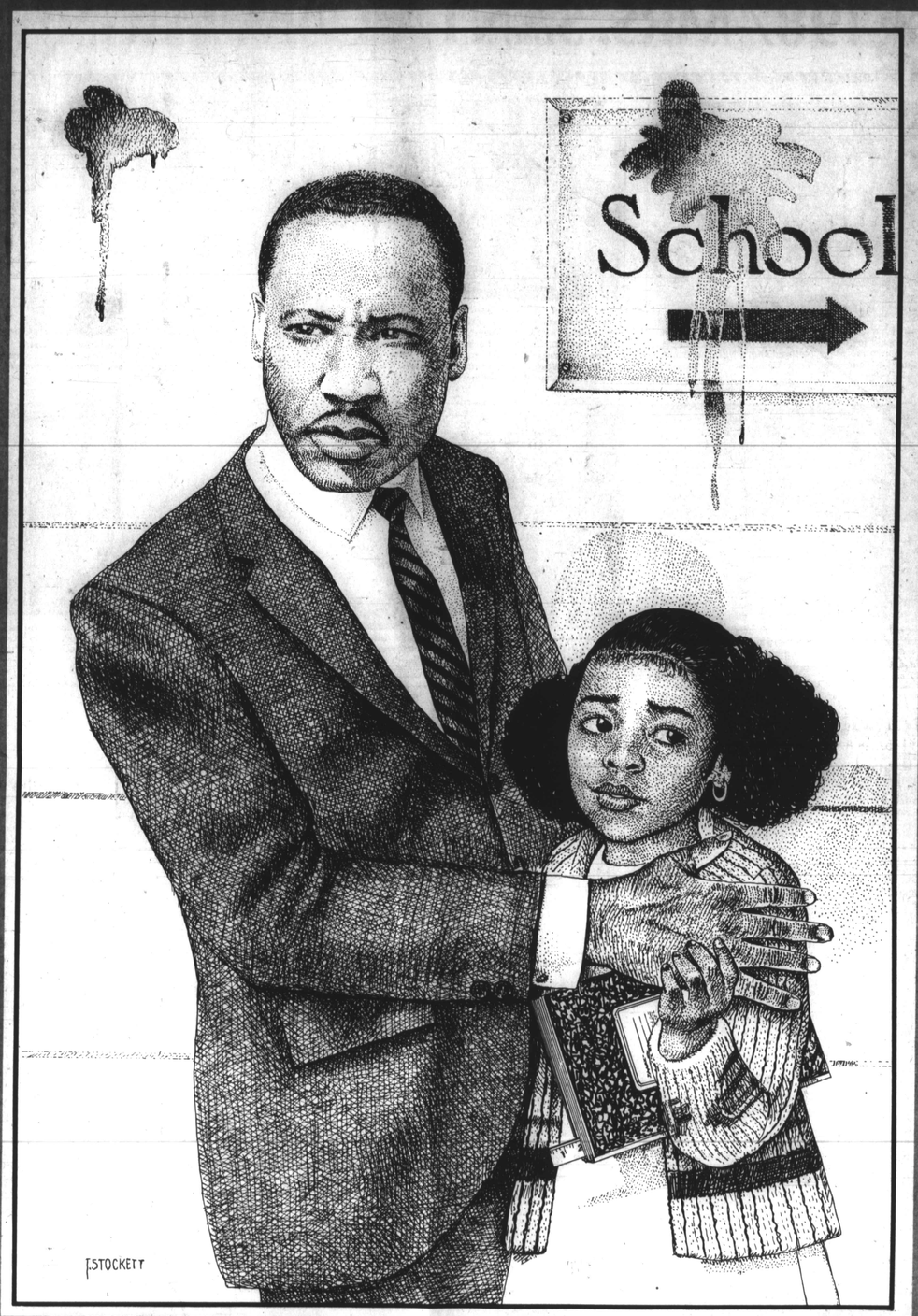


Thank You Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Nearly twenty years after you were taken away;
Again we celebrate your birthday.
A birthday giving us all time to reflect;
Time to reach out with patience and respect.
We remember the shackles put on our lives
And how we were treated before you arrived.
Thank you for daring, thank you for sharing;
Most of all thank you for caring.

Drawing by Thomas Stockett
Verse by Bruce Winfield Harrell

1988 Commemorative Poster Courtesy of the AFRO-AMERICAN Newspapers

THE ARTS

Ironic, irreverant, confrontational

ROBERT COLESCOTT

A Retrospective 1975-1986

By Elisse Wright
Special to the AFRO

Beginning Jan. 19, the Baltimore Museum of Art will host "Robert Colescott: A Retrospective," which features 22 expressionistic paintings spanning a 10-year period (1975-1986) in the artist's long career.

The large, brightly colored canvasses, according to Colescott, address the "sociology of race and sex and the ludicrous fact that black people have been left out of art history." The exhibit is making its first visit to Baltimore through the sponsorship of Otis Warren Real Estate.

Colescott, 52, is a native of Oakland, CA, where he received both his bachelor of arts and masters degrees from the University of California at Berkeley.

After a year of study in Paris, Colescott had his first show at the Portland Art Museum in 1958. Since then, Colescott has had several exhibitions in both New York and California.

Colescott now resides in Tucson, AZ, where he is a professor of Art at the University of Arizona. After 35 years of teaching and painting at universities in the U.S., France, Egypt, Colescott spent 1987 in Roswell, NM, painting in the Roswell Foundation Artist's Residency Program.

Over the years, Colescott also has received grants from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Guggenheim Foundation.

Colescott's work first came to the public's attention in the late 1970s after he began to paint "satiric homages" to great masterpieces of art history.

As an art professor, Colescott was repeatedly confronted with the fact that black people were conspiciously absent in art history. Colescott recognized the parallel with American history where the contributions of black Americans have been largely eliminated. He recalls, "When I was growing up there were two blacks mentioned as being significant in U.S. history: George Washington Carver and Booker T. Washington. Just two. By contrast, menial workers — Stepin Fetchits, Aunt Jemimas, bootblacks, etc. — were all too well known to us and to everyone. Their influence weighed heavily when we were only allowed two heroes in all of U.S history."

In one of his earliest "homages," Colescott replaces the revolutionaries in the famous painting of *Washington Crossing the Delaware* with a boatload of black cooks, Jemimas, drunks, and banjo players, led by George Washington Carver, while a black soldier embraces the American flag.

The stereotypes in Colescott's paintings are a powerful indictment of how black Americans are viewed in American society. Colescott considers the paintings a warning. He says:

"These paintings say 'Be careful of your expectations, white America. Because you might be better served by a different image of black womanhood when Aunt Jemima starts showing up in your art history."

An early and subtle source of inspiration for Colescott's "homages" may be the two years he spent in Egypt in the mid-1960's, which he considers "the strongest of any adult experience I've had."

"It meant a lot to me in terms of my self-esteem, because here was a whole country and everybody, from the top to the bottom was African," Cole-Scott said. "For me to experience that wiped out a lot of doubts I had about myself, my strengths, my place in the culture and fears I had about my own identity."

Colescott explains that "any work of art is a personal expression. When you close the door to your studio and begin to paint, you face your own world, your own insides. You paint from your own sources. That's where the inspiration comes from. My paintings are about my responses; what I need to say. As a black American I need to talk about identity and representation. No one has to buy my paintings or show them for me to be satisfied. My paintings enrich who I am. Painting is essentially a selfish act."

Colescott says the "homages" primarily confront the "attitudes white people have about black people." But he also admits that the stereotypes he presents are sometimes object because they want "those days to be dead and buried." "But," he adds "if whites are still nervous then we probably shouldn't let it be dead and buried. Discomfort is a legitimate response. It's a part of the message.

Like George Wolfe, the author of "The Colored Museum," Colescott feels that ". . . satire is one way of talking about a subject that is so serious it's hard to get at. It's hard to get people to think about things they are embarrassed about or afraid of . . . The reason people are able to stand and face it is the humorous element. Even now these images are not as controversial as they were back in the 1970's. Time has changed things. People are getting used to seeing figurative art with a social or political component."

Colescott admits that he fears that the popularity the "homages" may overshadow his other works. Already they have become signature paintings for him.

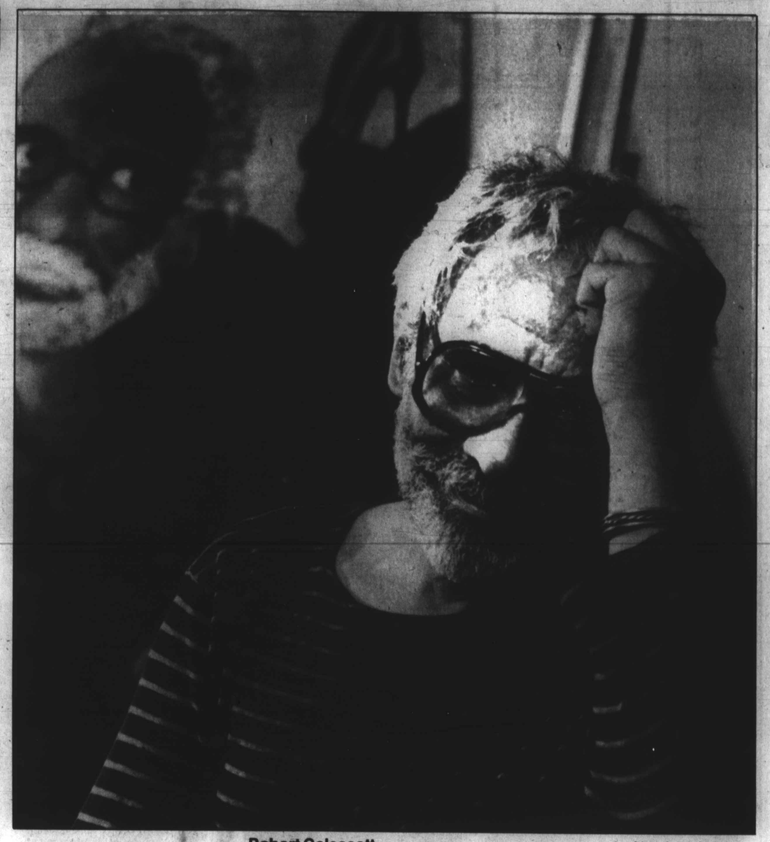
He says he doesn't "want to be known as 'the guy who does old masters in black face.' This was especially true several years ago whent he paintings were given only a shallow interpretation. "They were considered funny, that's all," he explains.

But in the last five years, serious art critics have encouraged audiences to approach the works in a more profound manner.

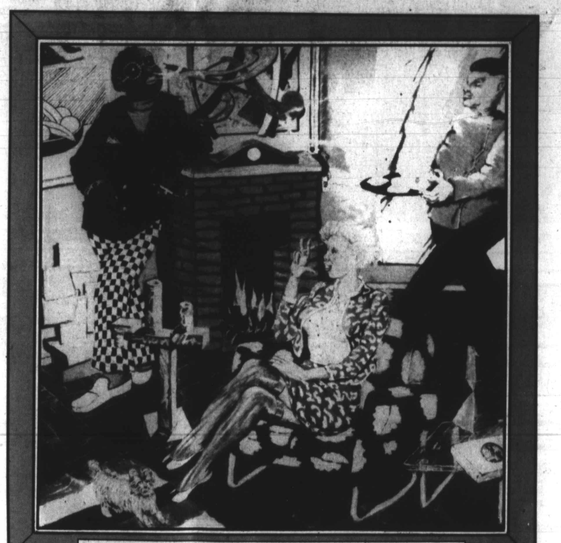
Now that the superficial appreciations have dissipated, Colescott is concerned that in their efforts to fully examine the content in his paintings, people may forget that they are to be enjoyed.

"When we look at paintings from the Renaissance, we don't always understand the content, but we can still appreciate the beauty in them. The appreciation of art should always be sensual. Wouldn't it be wonderful if someday we'd be out of touch with the issue of race in this country," he said.

"Robert Colescott: A Retrospective" will appear at the Baltimore Museum of Art throughout February in honor of Black History Month.



Robert Colescott — Photo by John Sher



Robert Colescott. *Tea for Two (The Collector)*. 1980. Collection Steven Jacobson, New York (photograph courtesy The Art Museum Association)

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