Robert Colescott's art links past, present

By Nashormeh N. R. Wilkie

"Knowledge of the Past is the Key to the Future" is the title of a series of paintings by artist Robert Colescott. His work is presently being exhibited at The Baltimore Museum of Art until February 28, 1988.

The theme is an appropriate one. Since Black History Month is here and one enjoys the plethora of programs and celebrations, it is important to remember why we're doing all of this in the first place. Never mind the fact that February is the coldest and shortest month of the year. Colescott's work is some invigorating stuff and the theme takes on new dimensions as one views his work.

Using irony and humor in the form of Narrative Figuration as an entree, the artist flaunts taboo subjects in art, race, sex, money, politics and power. He utilizes several devices to get his sharpened point across — among them are his reworking of famous European Old Master paintings (appropriation), poking fun at art historical conventions (such as Pop Art, Minimalism, and Cubism), and recalling familiar stereotypical images from literature, motion pictures, advertising and theatre.

Thus, an Aunt Jemima leaps out at us from within the context of a William DeKooning-like

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"TEA For Two (The Collector)," by Robert Colescott.

★ ★ BLACK ★ HISTORY ★ ★

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Here today with a full blast
Erupt reflections from the past.
Among the names that were listed true
Black historians were recorded too.

Lucy Terry, a slave girl from the age of five, living in Deerfield, Massachusetts, excelled in the field of poetry. In 1746, 16 year old Lucy Terry wrote the first recorded poem written in the New World by an African.

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—Colescott

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abstraction, declaring, "I Gets a Thrill Too When I See De Koo!" Of course, it doesn't hurt to have some knowledge of modern art history to get the gist of what Colescott is saying. On a surface level, he is taking a satirical dig at the negative stereotype of Black women that has come to us in the form of Aunt Jemima (the over-nurturing, sexless, domineering, matriarchal martyr).

There is an element of humor in her cartoon-like features. One may find oneself chuckling at the irony of it, after all, this is an Art Museum show. But, one a deeper level, there is a socio-political comment being made: a reminder that this distorted image and others like it have been used as a vehicle to reinforce certain Euro-centric cultural ideals like racial superiority—and worse, as a vehicle to promote self-hatred and shame among African-Americans. Several of Colescott's images of women raise the issue of acceptable standards of beauty, an issue still fresh in the minds of the young women in braids who have recently made the news.

The fact that Colescott is a skillful manipulator of these images also becomes clear in a painting entitled "George Washington Carver Crossing the Delaware: Page from an American History Textbook." This painting is based on an earlier and familiar painting by Emanuel Leutze which was done in 1851. Leutze's painting depicts a famous historical event: General George Washington crossing the Delaware River on Christmas Night 1776 in order to fight an important American Revolutionary War battle.

When one thinks of this incident, one doesn't immediately recall that the history books usually don't mention the black man who accompanied General Washington on that trip. (His name, by the way, was Prince Whipple and according to historians, he was a native African who was kidnapped, taken to Baltimore, and sold. He became bodyguard/slave to a General Whipple of New Hampshire who was an aide to Washington). Colescott's painting, done for the Bicentennial, replaces the mostly white male revolutionaries with a boatload of minstrels and coons.

He says, "I was talking about the way U.S. history was taught when I was growing up. There were two blacks mentioned as significant in the history of the country: George Washington Carver and Booker T. Washington, Just two. By contrast, the menial workers—the Stephin Fetchits, Aunt Jemimas, boot blacks, sportin' lifes, 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." Unfortunately this statement rings true, especially for those of us who came through the system before the institutionalization of Black Studies programs. Who were our other heroes? Colescott addresses this question as he loads the boat with the stereotypes and our token hero.

Another American icon, Shirley Temple, was the sweetheart of the silver screen during the 1930s. Her faithful side-kick was an elegant gentleman and consummate dancer, Bill "Bojangles" Robinson. When Shirley grew up, she got married to a man named Black. Colescott takes advantage of this "happy coincidence" and painted Shirley Temple black and Bill Robinson white."

His point is, what if Shirley Temple had been black and Bill Robinson a white man? Would American movie-goers have responded in the same affectionate manner? How would white males have reacted to a tap-dancing grinning specter of themselves? Isn't it funny (ironic) that the first U.S. ambassador to Ghana happened to be Shirley Temple of all people?!

Another painting, "Listening to Amos and Andy" deals with a popular radio show of the same era — only in this case, the illusion of race reversal was real. The joke was on the listeners because mainstrelsy had taken on the technology of radio waves. One can see that Colescott skillfully manipulates these culturally enhanced messages to make us think/smile/think—"what if?"

"Knowledge of the Past is the Key to the Future (St. Sebastian)" is the most recently completed painting in the exhibit (1986). In it, Colescott uses allegory to explore the idea of the interdependency of the races. His belief is that racial hatred and violence threaten the existence of us all. He is speaking directly to the South AFrican situation and the implications of annihilation from oppression there.

What kind of impact does being a black artist doing this kind of work have for Bob Colescott? Lowery Sims, Associate Curator for 20th Century Art at The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York has said that "Colescott's peculiar satirical bent sometimes places him in an ambivalent position in relation to the black community."

Indeed, his style and relentless attack on racism, sexism and consumerism do cause one to wonder where he is really coming from. He says that his paintings are designed to undermine cultural myths through irony and gross exaggeration. This may be so, but, aside from the social, political and historical context in which one sees his work, it must be noted that it is technically interesting, the images are powerful, and the paintings are colorful and solid.

Lowery Sims, who also wrote the catalogue essay, will be speaking on February 27th at 2 p.m. Her topic is, "The Politics of Re-appropriation." The Baltimore showing of this exhibition has been made possible by a generous gift from Museum Trustee Otis Warren, Jr. through his company, Otis Warren Real Estate Services. For further information about Black History Month programs, call the Museum's Office of Public Information at (301) 396-6320.

Nashormeh N. R. Wilkie
Coordinator,
Community Services
The Baltimore Museum of Art

"HOMAGE to Delacroix: Liberty Leading the People," by Robert Colescott.

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