Colescott was born in Oakland, California in 1925. This painting celebrates the pioneering spirit of Colescott’s parents, Lydia Hutton Colescott and Warrington Colescott, Sr. Following the famous exhortation of John Babsone Lane Soule (widely attributed to publisher Horace Greeley) in the mid-nineteenth century to “Go West,” Colescott’s parents moved from New Orleans to Oakland in 1919. Colescott evokes nineteenth-century silhouette traditions in the bust-length profile depictions of his parents, who are nestled in pink clouds facing each other across the composition. He has dispersed various elements—a tipi, a moose, a house, spotted mustang, a cowboy, an oil well, a goat, and mountain ranges—throughout a multicolored map of the United States. In the center, a large tree in a cut away space supports the nest of two birds, representing Colescott’s parents, who tend to two chicks, which represent the artist and his older brother Warrington, Jr. The garbage that litters the clouds represents what Colescott described in 1981 as the “used underwear, popular trash, studio sweepings... that didn’t pass art history.”
Untitled, 1949

Oil on canvas

Collection of Lauren McIntosh, Berkeley, CA, L2019.104.46

This work—never before exhibited in public—is in the collection of Colescott’s cousin Lauren McIntosh, who was given it by the artist. It indicates his style of painting when he was working on his graduate degree at Berkeley. What is striking is the interplay of rectangular and trapezoidal planes, which predicate how he organized his compositions later in his career despite their more figurative orientation.
Relationship, 1949

Oil on canvas

Courtesy of the Estate and Blum & Poe, Los Angeles/New York/Tokyo, L2019.104.9
Rue St. Marceaux, 1949

Gouache on paper

Courtesy of the Estate and Blum & Poe, Los Angeles/New York/Tokyo, L2019.104.16
Homage à Ferdinand Léger, 1950

Pen and graphite on paper

Courtesy of the Estate and Blum & Poe, Los Angeles/New York/Tokyo, L2019.104.15
Aussi Assis, 1955–56

Oil on canvas

Courtesy of the Estate and Blum & Poe, Los Angeles/New York/Tokyo, L2019.104.8

After receiving a master’s degree from Berkeley, although he would have preferred to work with students on the college level, Colescott went to work teaching art to middle school students in the public school system in Seattle, Washington. He began to free himself of Léger’s influence. His paintings of this period show how he began to engage with the more figurative aspects of Abstract Expressionism, as seen in the loose, vigorous brushstrokes of Willem de Kooning, and the gestural figuration developed by artists on the west coast.
Flowers, 1958–59

Oil on canvas

Courtesy of the Estate and Blum & Poe, Los Angeles/New York/Tokyo, L2019.104.13
White Bowl (Distance Traversed), 1962

Oil on canvas

Collection of Jordan D. Schnitzer, L2019.104.40

The works that Colescott created in Oregon—where he moved in 1957 to teach at Portland State College—are less brushy in character and are more aligned to the work of Bay Area figurative painters such as Elmer Bischoff, who had briefly been Colescott’s teacher at Berkeley.
View of Columbia Gorge, 1960
Oil on canvas
Collection of Jordan D. Schnitzer, L2019.104.42
Sleeping Beauty?, 2002

Acrylic on canvas

Courtesy of the Estate and Blum & Poe, Los Angeles/New York/Tokyo, L2019.104.2
Expectation, 1963

Acrylic on canvas

Courtesy of the Estate and Blum & Poe, Los Angeles/New York/Tokyo, L2019.104.14
This painting, done on the eve of Colescott’s sojourn in Egypt, is notable for its elaborate details of the interior around the nude study, as seen in the pattern of the back walls and rug at the lower left. We also see how he uses checkered patterned elements—garments, floors, tablecloths, etc.—to activate space, and to create a spatial bridge between the table on which the figure leans and her lap as she sits in the chair. The complexity of the planes created by the walls, floor, folding screen and the blue structure to the left reminds us of the early untitled painting from 1946 in this exhibition.

We can see similar elements in Interior II—Homage to Roy Lichtenstein, painted three decades later, in which Colescott has inserted a black woman into the Pop artist’s original interior. As critic Martin Lobel has noted: “Through his alterations to the image, Colescott forces us to see the literal but also figurative (read: racialized) whiteness on which the coolness and detachment of Lichtenstein’s image—and, by extension, that of Pop in general—depends.” This demonstrates how Colescott’s challenge to western art truisms was ongoing throughout his career.
Interior II—Homage to Roy Lichtenstein, 1991

Acrylic on canvas

Private collection, L2019.104.37
We Await Thee, 1964
Oil on canvas
Gift of the Artist, 66.60
Nubian Queen, 1966
Acrylic on canvas
Private collection, New York City, NY, L2019.104.47

Colescott’s Egyptian paintings present more abstract representations of the figure in space. On the one hand this could signify a return to earlier stylistic interests, and on the other it might be said that this effect was inspired by the eroded reliefs of the Valley of the Queens, an ancient burial ground south of Cairo. The partly effaced surfaces of these reliefs, with the fragmentary remnants of faces and figures, suggested to Colescott a spirit world or picture of the afterlife, which was, of course, a cornerstone of early Egyptian religion. The figures are sometimes fragmentary or upside down. There is no attempt to describe actual space, as the paintings are built up through large areas of pure color.
Olympia, ca. 1959
Oil on canvas
Collection of the Jordan Schnitzer Family Foundation, L2019.104.43

Along with *From a Fragment Sargent*, painted in 1962, this composition is a prelude to Colescott’s appropriations of western art history in the 1970s. Here he pays homage to the famous 1863 painting of the same title by Édouard Manet in the collection of the Musée d’Orsay, Paris. Colescott softens the confrontational attitude of the main figure in the Manet and brings the black maid into the same light and plane so that she is more in dialogue with Olympia. Her posture provocatively suggests it is she who is bringing the offering of flowers to Olympia.
From a Fragment Sargent, 1962

Oil on canvas

Courtesy of the Estate and Blum & Poe, Los Angeles/New York/Tokyo, L2019.104.10

*From a Fragment Sargent* was inspired by the 1881 painting *The Daughters of Edward Darley Boit* by John Singer Sargent in the collection of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Colescott compresses the scene to focus on the daughter at the left and the large blue and white vase that illustrates the vogue for Asian ceramics in the late 1800s.
Eat Dem Taters, 1975

Acrylic on canvas
Rosenblum Family, L2019.104.38

By the mid-1970s, Colescott was fully engaged in his appropriation of art history. Eat Dem Taters—a spoof of van Gogh’s Potato Eaters—is particularly notorious. Here Colescott replaces van Gogh’s somber peasants with exuberantly grinning minstrel figures in order to send up the myth of the “happy darky.” The notion that blacks could be happy with very little was a staple of pre-World War II Hollywood films. This concept was also included in school textbooks of the period, in which blacks were described as fortunate to be enslaved, since slavery removed them from their previous, barbaric circumstances in Africa. Colescott effectively uses the stylization of racist stereotypes of blacks to draw viewers into the painting; and, regardless of their reaction, he forces them to confront their racist attitudes, anger, or compliance.
Study for George Washington Carver Crossing the Delaware, 1974

Pencil on paper

Benny Andrews Nene Humphrey Collection, L2019.104.53

In *George Washington Carver Crossing the Delaware: Page from an American History Textbook*, Colescott replaced George Washington in Emanuel Leutze’s famous painting in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum with the renowned agricultural researcher. Colescott replaced the rest of the crew with a literal boatload of stereotypes lifted from Hollywood movies: a chef, a barefoot fisherman, a musician strumming a banjo, a man swilling moonshine, a shoeshine boy, and a mammy figure performing fellatio on the flag bearer at the center of the composition. Colescott has reduced the size and impressiveness of the boat in the original 1851 painting and undermined its seaworthiness with a tin patch. He has also enlarged the American flag to convey the idea that the boat and its inhabitants constitute a metaphor for America itself. *George Washington Carver Crossing the Delaware* is the most gleeful and unbridled attack on racist ideology in his oeuvre, and it would become his most famous work, maintaining a notoriety that has persisted to today.
The Wreckage of the Medusa, 1978

Acrylic on canvas
Private collection, L2019.104.44

While not a direct reference to Théodore Géricault’s 1818–19 painting, Raft of the Medusa in the Louvre Museum, the distribution of body parts and debris relates more closely again to the territory Colescott staked out for himself: “used underwear, popular trash, studio sweepings... that didn’t pass art history.” As opposed to the Géricault composition, which is a scene of desperation with little hope of rescue, Colescott’s reminds us more of the wreck of the Titanic, particularly as portrayed in the 1997 movie directed by James Cameron. We can bring to this image the observation of the critic Vivian Raynor, who noted in 1987 that Colescott “knows that the ship of civilization is sinking” but “he remains on board.”
In *Beauty is in the Eye of the Beholder*, Colescott depicts himself at an easel working on a version of Henri Matisse’s *La Danse* of 1910 in the collection of the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg, Russia. He has turned away from the painting to look at a woman in a state of partial undress. According to Colescott, the painting is an allegory of his creative process, in which he is caught between the world of his imagination, which he depicts on canvas, and the real world, with all its distractions and allurements. In a 1981 interview with artist/writer Joe Lewis, Colescott notes that he was “involved with these non-flesh-and-blood women” in the Matisse, while he was “also faced with the flesh-and-blood woman. It’s a conflict between art and reality.”
Les Demoiselles d’Alabama: Vestidas, 1985

Acrylic on canvas

Seattle Art Museum. General Acquisition Fund, Bill and Melinda Gates Art Acquisition Fund, Margaret E. Fuller Purchase Fund, and Patricia Denny Art Acquisition Fund, 2016.12, L2019.104.61

This is one of two appropriations of Pablo Picasso’s 1907 Demoiselles d’Avignon in the Museum of Modern Art that Colescott painted in 1985. He designated the two versions “desnuda” (nude) and “vestida” (clothed) referring as well to Francisco Goya’s two representations of a “maja” (low-class woman). The Demoiselles d’Alabama are rendered in Colescott’s characteristic fleshy, gestural style, which contrasts with Picasso’s more linear, graphic style. This version shows the figures dressed in exuberant clothing and styles. He explained that his appropriations were “about sources and ends,” as Picasso “started with European art and abstracted through African art, producing “Africanism,’ but keeping one foot in European art.” Colescott, however, “began with Picasso’s Africanism and moved toward European art, keeping one foot in Africanism.” This anti-academic, iconoclastic approach to figuration indicate Colescott’s explorations of the aesthetic issues surrounding black and brown women. It crucially touches on the profound challenges around self-image among these women in the context of European cultural domination.
Dulacrow’s Masterwork: A Mockumentary Film, 1976

Digital video, color, sound, Ed. 1/10
Duration: 43 minutes, 50 seconds
Rubell Family Collection, Miami, FL

Art historian Lizzetta Lefalle Collins reports that Colescott produced this video, Dulacrow’s Masterwork: A Mockumentary Film, in 1976 to document a performance that was presented at the San Francisco Art Institute where he was teaching. Colescott is seen as his alter ego “Eugene Dulacrow” giving a slide lecture on the iconic 1830 painting Liberty Leading the People by Eugène Delacroix, which is in the collection of the Louvre. Set to the music of the modernist, French composer Edgard Varèse, the video is Colescott’s satirical version of what he considered boring and pedantic art history lectures. Colescott painted his own version of the Delacroix painting entitled Homage to Delacroix: Liberty Leading the People, also in 1976, while masquerading as Dulacrow and listening to recordings of Varèse’s Intégrales, Density 21.5, Ionisation and Octandre. These compositions represent the composer’s experimentation with sound and rhythm to find new possibilities within familiar elements of music, similar to Colescott’s experiments with art historical icons.
Susanna and the Elders (Novelty Hotel), 1980

Acrylic on canvas

Seattle Art Museum. Mary Arrington Small Estate Acquisition Fund, 84.170, L2019.104.60

This is a particularly provocative retelling of the biblical story of Susanna and the Elders. While Susanna is usually portrayed as the victim of inappropriate voyeurism of tormenting men, here she turns the table and becomes the tormenter, performing a virtual striptease in front of them. As in several compositions in this exhibition, Colescott puts himself in this composition, here as a Peeping Tom furtively looking in on the scene through a basement window.
Susanna and the Elders, 1980
Colored pencil and graphite on paper
Private collection, Minneapolis, L2019.104.25
Susanna and the Elders, 1980

Colored pencil and graphite on paper

Courtesy of the Estate and Blum & Poe, Los Angeles/New York/Tokyo, L2019.104.17
The Colonel Sanders and Aunt Jemima Trilogy: Instant Chicken!, 1972
Acrylic on canvas
Private collection, New York City, NY, L2019.104.48
The Colonel Sanders and Aunt Jemima Trilogy: Instant Chicken!, Cactus Jack in El Dorado, and I Gets a Thrill, Too, When I Sees De Koo are shown together to illustrate the complexity of Colescott’s reading of the iconic and controversial character of Aunt Jemima. Instant Chicken! is one of three completed in 1972, which involve the characters of Aunt Jemima and Colonel Sanders. The compositions implicitly comment on how black cooking was co-opted by white commercial interests, and this particular pairing allows Colescott to remix his historical sources. Aunt Jemima was a fictional character (played by Nancy Green) who was created in the late 19th century as a character to brand a ready mixed self-rising flour for Pearl Milling Company. “Colonel” Harland Sanders was an entrepreneur who finalized his fried chicken recipe for public consumption in the 1940s. In Instant Chicken!, the kitchen area of the restaurant is dominated by Colonel Sanders and a white maître d’. Aunt Jemima grins and claps her hands at the lower right, while several black cooks frame the composition. Each figure in the painting is identified by name and the presence of “Sonny Washington” at the lower right represents the community of African Americans that Colescott depicts in his 1987 Knowledge of the Past is the Key to the Future: The Other Washingtons.
Cactus Jack in El Dorado, 1977

Acrylic on canvas

Collection of the Newark Museum, Gift of Gregory A. Lunt, 1988, L2019.104.55

_Cactus Jack in Eldorado_ is one of two compositions from 1977 that shows Aunt Jemima roughing it on the frontier, cooking a meal, as Cactus Jack pans for gold. These compositions directly relate to Colescott’s frequent evocation of the western myths and stories that dominated his childhood in movies and books. The landscape, which has been an important element in his work since the 1960s, literally carries the story as the river flows from the top of the composition to the foreground.
I Gets a Thrill, Too, When I Sees De Koo, 1978

Acrylic on canvas

The Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University, Gift of Senator and Mrs. William Bradley, L2019.104.57

The most notable apparition of Aunt Jemima is in Colescott’s 1978 appropriation of Willem de Kooning’s Woman I of 1952–53 (Museum of Modern Art), one of the icons of Abstract Expressionism. I Gets a Thrill Too When I Sees De Koo replaces the grimacing figure in the de Kooning with a mischievous grinning avatar of Aunt Jemima. But this painting is also a variation of a Pop Art riff: I Get a Thrill When I See Bill by Mel Ramos, where the head of the woman in the De Kooning is replaced with headshot of a contemporary 1970s model. Colescott navigates a path from the gestural distortion of the de Kooning, through the glamorized version by Ramos. Thus, his Aunt Jemima acquires the sexual gloss of the Ramos, even as Colescott circles back technically to the gestural figuration of the de Kooning and the 1950s and 60s figural trends from which he has developed his style.
A Legend Dimly Told, 1982
Acrylic on canvas
Mott-Warsh Collection, Flint, Michigan, L2019.104.52

This is one of several paintings—including Auvers sur Oise (Crow in the Wheatfield) of 1981 and Lost in the Jardin des Plantes of 1982—in which Colescott presents a lush landscape as the focal point of the composition, while various human shenanigans go on at the lower edge/foreground of the composition, invariably presided over by an outsized character (Vincent van Gogh, Colescott). One wonders if Colescott was thinking of the character of the Lord (“De Lawd”) played by Rex Ingram in the 1936 film, Green Pastures, with its all black cast.
Tom & Eva, 1974

Graphite on paper

Courtesy of the Estate and Blum & Poe, Los Angeles/New York/Tokyo, L2019.104.7
Rejected Advertisement for Droste’s Chocolate, 1974

Graphite on paper

Courtesy of the Estate and Blum & Poe, Los Angeles/New York/Tokyo, L2019.104.22
Goddamn You, 1975

Graphite on paper

Courtesy of the Estate and Blum & Poe, Los Angeles/New York/Tokyo, L2019.104.6
The Swing, 1976

Graphite on paper

Courtesy of the Estate and Blum & Poe, Los Angeles/New York/Tokyo, L2019.104.21
The Wind, 1976

Graphite on paper

Courtesy of the Estate and Blum & Poe, Los Angeles/New York/Tokyo, L2019.104.20
Auntie’s Skirts, 1976

Graphite on paper

Courtesy of the Estate and Blum & Poe, Los Angeles/New York/Tokyo, L2019.104.19
My Shadow, 1977

Crayon on paper

Courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York, NY, L2019.104.50
Tom & Huck Finn, 1975
Graphite on paper
Private collection, L2019.104.39
Miss Black Oakland, ca. 1967

Acrylic on Egyptian linen
The Rachofsky Collection, L2019.104.56

Miss Black Oakland stands in her gold bikini and contestant sash smiling out at the spectators. Behind her is a more abstracted version of the colorful landscapes that appear in his paintings of the mid-1960s that seems to show a blue mountain with wispy white clouds leading down to areas of ochre, Kelly green, yellow, and hunter green. But Miss Oakland is practically upstaged by the white female who stands in a spotlight created by a man’s hand holding a flashlight. Her cast shadow is rather monstrous, as if Colescott was commenting on the sham of appearances that we value. Even more mysteriously, the lower legs and shoes of three male figures—rendered in black and white—hang above the arch of the abstracted landscape. Colescott has eschewed usual perspective systems and reoriented our sense of order. Despite their truncated presences—these hand, legs, and feet—and intrusive character, these male entities exude a power dynamic that makes it clear that the women in this composition are subject to their scrutiny.
**Havana Corona**, 1970

Acrylic on canvas


*Havana Corona* became the compositional prototype for several of Colescott’s works in the 1970s that featured a centralized female figure. They took on some of the aspects of the classic pin-up, which, for Colescott, emerges directly out of images he encountered as a soldier in World War II. While it seems at first to be a Pop Art engagement of product placement, *Havana Corona* is much more complex, as it examines the dynamics of race and gender in the Latin American context, where the legacies of assimilation and *mestizaje* (mixture) often resulted in contradictory phenomena—emotionally and psychologically. Colescott captures this by placing the disembodied hand of someone who is obviously a prosperous, upper class white man at the margins of the composition. The hand holds a cigar, the smoke from which morphs into a cloud-like element that in turn frames a floral crown hovering over the head of the dark-skinned woman. A dandified biracial man is suspended at the right and to the lower left is a bubble in which we see a sexual encounter that would have produced this mixed-race individual.
Bye, Bye Miss American Pie, 1971

Acrylic on canvas

Collection of the Akron Art Museum, Museum Acquisition Fund, L2019.104.1

The title evokes the 1971 song by Don McClean, which captured the spirit and disillusions of American society in the throes of the Vietnam war and counter-culture explorations of its youth. The title of the song and the painting were meant to convey the notion of opportunity and advancement in American society as getting a slice of the American pie. Colescott places a slice of the pie on the central female figure as a fig leaf element. At the lower register a black soldier in camouflage seems to fire his rifle aimlessly at some unseen target to the right. Is that an expression of his determination to earn entry into the American Dream, or of frustration at his failure to do so?
American Beauty, 1976  
Acrylic on canvas  

Courtesy of the Estate and Blum & Poe, Los Angeles/New York/Tokyo, L2019.104.4

Although it was painted in the 1970s, this painting assumes a special significance in the context of today’s #metoo movement. Colescott lays bare the sexual manipulation of women in fashion, beauty pageants, sports, and the movies, which indicate the pervasiveness of such behavior in society at large. We are confronted with the troubling truths that often lay behind media images that present women in glamorous, glossy guises.
Tin Gal, 1976

Acrylic on canvas

Courtesy of the Estate and Blum & Poe, Los Angeles/New York/Tokyo, L2019.104.5

Colescott did several images of women composed of different substances—tin, cacti, etc.—that were intended to present metaphors for different stereotypical temperaments and personalities. Here the tin cowgirl brandishes her gun and Colescott has inscribed “fearless” and “avenger” in the composition. At the bottom he stenciled, “INVINCIBLE: HER ONLY FEAR IS COMING UNSCREWED,” a reference to the rude assessment of what men think ails strong, liberated women who refuse to accommodate their sexist expectations.
**Tinhorn**, 1976
Graphite on paper

Courtesy of the Estate and Blum & Poe, Los Angeles/New York/Tokyo, L2019.104.18

Contrary to expectations, Colescott produced a drawing of the male counterpart of *Tin Girl*, who presents himself more as a dandy than a superhero. Colescott characterizes different parts of his anatomy as mechanized elements (“ball joint”) and inscribes at the lower right: “the deck is stacked and...,” and suggestively declares that “the tinhorn plays for keeps.”
Lone Wolf in Paris, 1977

Acrylic on canvas

Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Promised gift of Ed and Sandy Martin in honor of Howard N. Fox, L2019.104.59

Many who grew up watching Acme cartoons, remember the wolf character (created by the renowned cartoonist Tex Avery) whose eyes would pop out of his head as he jumped into a lateral position when ogling and howling at a good-looking woman. One might see this image as an avatar of Colescott, who frequently visited Paris in the 1970s and 80s, after having spent time in Paris and the south of France after his Egyptian sojourn in the 1960s. This painting is accompanied by three drawings that illustrate different aspects of the wolf character *Strutting His Stuff*, *Checking It Out*, and declaring, *Yes Virginia*. 
Lone Wolf Trilogy (Strutting His Stuff, Checking It Out, Yes Virginia), 1976

Graphite on paper

Courtesy of the Estate and Blum & Poe, Los Angeles/New York/Tokyo, L2019.104.23a–c
Bad Habits, 1983

Acrylic on canvas

Gift of Douglas and Lila Goodman, 2001.90.9
The Three Graces: Art, Sex and Death, 1981

Acrylic on canvas


This painting draws on a theme from antiquity that was revived in the work of Italian artists such as Raphael and Sandro Botticelli during the Renaissance. The three female figures usually represent the qualities of “charm,” “beauty,” and “creativity.” Colescott brings a more contemporary nuance to these avatars, adding almost a punk quality as he characterized them as representing “Art,” “Sex,” and “Death.” The Graces are usually represented nude, with their arms around each other’s shoulders as they stand in a circle with one figure facing left, a center figure standing with her back to the viewer and the third standing facing right. In Colescott’s version, the figures are rendered more individually rather than as three versions of the same figure. They have their own personalities, skin tones, clothing, and accessories.
Knowledge of the Past is the Key to the Future: St. Sebastian, 1986

Acrylic on canvas

Private collection, L2019.104.36

In this painting, the body of the saint has become a perfectly bi-furcated hermaphrodite—black male/white female—shot through with the arrows. On either side of this figure float the heads of a white male and a black female, which are tethered together by nooses. As Colescott noted, he was dealing with the “interrelatedness of the races, common destiny, and the idea of survival...if one goes, we all go.” An ominous pile of human skulls lies to the left amid the rocky terrain, reminding us that we are always under the “threat of oblivion.” While the meaning of the composition is centered on outdated taboos around interracial relations, recent events in which nooses have been left by anonymous individuals to intimate African Americans demonstrate the persistence of prejudice and attempts at oppression and suppression in our society.
Big Bathers: Another Judgment, 1984
Acrylic on canvas
Delaware Art Museum. F.V. du Pont Acquisition Fund, 1986, L2019.104.33

Despite efforts towards diversity during the last four decades, contemporary media still projects stereotypes of female beauty that privilege the proportions and images preferred by the fashion industry and media. Here Colescott draws on the Greek myth of the Judgment of Paris to tackle the challenges that women face to assert a positive self-image that deconstructs the prevailing ideals. This gathering of four women offers a more varied view of physical beauty and integrity with their different body types, skin color and hair texture. This painting is one of a number of paintings in which Colescott dealt with the subject of Bathers. The locales of these paintings are invariably secluded pools of water surrounded by vegetation and rocks. As seen in this version of Legend Dimly Told, which Colescott first explored in the early 1960s.
Legend Dimly Told, 1961

Oil on canvas

Courtesy of the Estate and Blum and Poe, Los Angeles/ New York/ Tokyo, L2019.104.11
The Judgment of Paris, 1984
Acrylic on canvas
Collection of Jordan D. Schnitzer, L2019.104.41
**Beauty is Only Skin Deep, 1991**

Acrylic on canvas

Collection of The University of Arizona Museum of Art, Tucson. Museum Purchase Funds provided by the Edward J. Gallagher, Jr. Memorial Fund, L2019.104.64

This painting demonstrates the virtuosity with which Colescott approached figuration and compositional organization in the 1990s. Here a spectral couple rendered in black with red accents seems to emerge from the pink cloud like an extra-terrestrial formation. Within the cloud, and below at the extreme left corner, there are Picasso-esque faces that face frontal with profile views in the same form. To the right is a brown face that resembles a tribal head, which covers itself with hands of a lighter hue. Crammed in between all this is a multi-colored topographical form of the African continent on the left, and a landscape of a brown path with greenery on the other side, leading to purple mountains and a section of blue sky in the distance.
Venus I, 1996
Acrylic on canvas
Gift of Arlene and Harold Schnitzer, 2003.4.3

This painting relates to Colescott’s *Bad Habits* of 1983 where he deals with the subject of the artist’s studio. In the earlier painting, the nude model floats above the artist’s head as if she is an idea coming into being as he paints. In a continuation of Colescott’s ongoing examination of issues of beauty and race, here he shows the model sitting on a bench with her back to us, contemplating a mirror in which a reflection of black woman confronts her. While Colescott depicts himself at the easel capturing his *Bad Habits*, the easel in *Venus I* is anthropomorphic, with easel’s legs, a torso formed by a painting and a palette from which two precariously perched paintbrushes hang like arms and hands. A second palette with brushes poked through the thumbhole serves as the head. Colescott himself may appear as two specters in this painting: the illusive Cheshire Cat whose leering set of lips and teeth clinch a proverbial stogy, which materializes from a checkerboard tablecloth—the tail end of which is anchored by the buttocks of the Venus. Or, he could be the rather sketchy figure at the lower left that is reminiscent of one of Picasso’s self-presentations.
Tea for Two (The Collector), 1980

Acrylic on canvas

Cleveland Museum of Art, Gift of Agnes Gund in honor of Darren Walker 2017.128, L2019.104.31
Carrie Mae Weems
American, born 1953

Framed by Modernism (Seduced By One Another, Yet Bound by Certain Social Conventions; You Framed The Likes of Me & I Framed You, But We Were Both Framed By Modernism; & Even Though We Knew Better, We Continued That Time Honored Tradition of The Artist & His Model), 1996

Silver gelatin prints with sandblasted text on glass panel

Private collection, L2019.104.35a–c
Framed by Modernism was created by Carrie Mae Weems when she was commissioned by Miriam Roberts to make a portrait of Colescott for the catalogue of his installation at the Venice Biennale in 1997. Weems decided instead to explore the dynamics of the studio and the relationship between the artist and the model. In this situation, however, Weems is as much the artist as she is the model, so she posed herself in the nude assuming various poses in the corner at the back of Colescott’s studio. Colescott is positioned next to an easel at the front of the studio space with his back to Weems, his head in his hand or on his hip. The relative roles of the artist, model and viewer are in question, but in the end, it is Weems, who despite her diminutive presence, is in control of the situation. Weems noted she wanted to create an image which examines “the critical intersection between art and practice, men and women, and gender and identity, and notions about the object and the subject.”
Colored T.V., 1977

Acrylic on canvas
San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Gift of Vicki and Kent Logan, L2019.104.62

Colescott has relied on various meanings of the word “colored” to inform this scene of a black woman watching television. On the one hand, the word was used to refer to black people in a rather pejorative way, and on the other, refers to advances in television technology that permitted the transmission of images in color as opposed to black and white. Interestingly, the image on the television is that of a blond, white woman, reminding us of the lack of diversity in the media, which began to be addressed in the late 1960s and 1970s with the debut of television shows such as Julia, The Jeffersons, Benson, What’s Happening, and The Flip Wilson Show.
This composition can be seen as an homage to the post war “construction worker” paintings by Colescott’s mentor Fernand Léger. It features a wife visiting her construction worker husband on site. She wears a pot on her head to mimic his own hard hat, and to the left is a vignette of a kitchen counter and sink with dishes, and a variety of construction workers, including a shirtless black man, a supervisor wearing a shirt and tie with a cigar. The scaffolding that creates horizontal/vertical framework in paintings such as Léger’s 1951 *Builders with a Rope* in the collection of Guggenheim Museum is mirrored in *Hard Hats* by the placement of the wooden beam hauled by the black worker and the planks of wood suspended from an unseen crane. Both mimic the horizontal and vertical alignment of the windowpanes. Colescott’s celebration of ordinary people in their pursuit of life, liberty, and happiness—the American corollary to *liberté, égalité, fraternité*—indicates how Léger and Colescott shared political perspectives.
Real Crow, 1976

Acrylic on canvas on wooden panel

Courtesy of the Estate and Blum & Poe, Los Angeles/New York/Tokyo, L2019.104.24
Kitchen Assassination, 1971
Acrylic on Egyptian linen
Private Collection, Minneapolis, L2019.104.26
Colescott was deeply affected by the representations of blacks in the mass media, so he created many works that address their marginalization. Some of the most effective works turn familiar images on their heads by inserting black and other minority figures in situations usually associated in advertising, television or film with white Americans. This composition demonstrates Colescott’s interest in the interpretive possibilities of product brands and advertising strategies.

The depiction of the crow in top hat and smoking a cigar is typical of the anthropomorphism that was seen in cartoon characters such as Heckel and Jeckel. Crows have a disruptive reputation both in mythology and popular lore. On the one hand, they are symbols of bad luck and death, and on the other, symbols of life magic, mystery, and destiny. With reference to this image we can contemplate the fact that Old Crow bourbon is a signature product of the state of Kentucky where it was first distilled by James C. Crow in the 1830s. It’s original logo, a crow perched atop grains of barley, is rumored to have been a symbol of the bridging of the North and South during the Civil War.
Shirley Temple Black and Bill Robinson White, 1980

Acrylic on canvas

Collection of Arlene & Harold Schnitzer, L2000.5.3

The title of this painting demonstrates how Colescott exploited the convenience of Temple’s married name to achieve his code switch with regard to the racial identity of the two well-known protagonists. Susan Gubar suggests that “As in so many of his other paintings, this picture converts characters traditionally portrayed as white into blacks, switching the races so as to ridicule, first our assumptions about white hegemony in cultural scripts and, second, the caricaturing that infects almost all depictions of African Americans in mass-produced as well as elite art.” The switch also causes us to wonder if America would ever accept a young black girl as its sweetheart and whether it would tolerate the image of a white male obsequiously tap dancing. Gubar notes that Colescott’s self-described “one-two punch” in this instance “pertains to the shocking stories it uncovers about race and sex” and “the significance of the racechanged child in terms of sexuality, lineage, and cultural endowment.”
Listening to Amos and Andy, 1982

Acrylic on canvas

Chrysler Museum of Art, Norfolk, VA. Gift of the family of Joel B. Cooper, in memory of Mary and Dudley Coper 2002.26.4, L2019.104.28

In a 1981 interview with artist/writer Joe Lewis, Colescott noted how when “Amos and Andy” was broadcast on the radio, the characters could be played by white people. “Everybody listened to them...,” and “it’s ironic that there were black families out there listening to Amos and Andy and visualizing them as black.” He noted further that this was “a painting about human weakness, but it’s not a pessimistic painting. It’s about how people believe something that isn’t so, how they’re hypnotized into believing what they want to believe. I think it looks gently at these black human beings, but not so gently at Amos and Andy characters. I made them kind of raunchy looking, but I empathize with the people that are being led down the path by this kind of commercial blackness.”
An American Rescued in the Desert by The Mahdi and Emperor Haile Selassie, 1986

Acrylic on canvas

Courtesy of N’Namdi Contemporary Fine Art, Miami, L2019.104.45

As the story goes, in 1966 when Emperor Haile Selassie made a state visit to Jamaica, he was surprised at the tumultuous reception given to him by over 100,000 members of the Rastafarian group who had constituted around the idea that he was God. This type of messianic belief has been observed among populations of black and brown peoples who sought a savior to bring them out of the oppression of the mainstream power structures. One thinks of the emergence of the Ghost Dance phenomenon among Native Americans in the 1880s, or Marcus Garvey and his “back to Africa” message among African Americans in the 1920s. In this painting, Colescott shows a black American, dressed in a tropical print shirt, finding his own messianic rescue. He is supported by Haile Selassie and another, the Sudanese religious leader Muhammad Ahmad bin Abd Allah, designated the “Mahdi” or “Redeemer,” who fought against Egyptian and British forces for Sudan.
Arabs: The Emir of Iswid (How Wide the Gulf?), 1992

Acrylic on canvas

Rubell Family Collection, Miami, FL, L2019.104.58

Colescott’s oblique reference in the title of this painting to the so-called Gulf War of 1990–1991, which is also known as Operation Desert Storm, is matched by his enigmatic reference to Tell el-Iswid, an archaeological site on the eastern delta of the Nile, which revealed the existence of a fourth millennium culture. Colescott indicates the location of his Iswid on the yellow shape of a country that frames the Emir’s profile. Ghostly apparitions of a veiled woman, a gun-toting man and men wearing keffiyeh form beneath him. These specters interlace with two nude females, who are chained together at the wrists as they sit on a pile of oil barrels and bananas, both products of the Middle East. Colescott may be encouraging us to contemplate how countries can be economically stymied and politically limited by the resources that are the very sources of their wealth.
Choctaw Nickel, 1994
Liquitex, gel medium on canvas
Courtesy of The New School Art Collection, New York, NY (Gift of Vera List), L2019.104.54

Critic David Bonetti wrote: “There is often more to Colescott than what first appears.” In his reading of this painting—which examines the reality of African/Native American relations—he focuses on the “passage of golden paint scumbled atop the fiery red,” which he finds “masterful.” Furthermore, “the figures along the bottom of the painting, variously representing intermingled black and Indian peoples, exhibit an impressive array of painting techniques and style,” demonstrating that Colescott’s “painting skills might be the first thing overlooked.”
The Bilingual Cop, 1995

Acrylic on canvas


Painted over twenty years ago, this painting is another instance of Colescott’s prescience in terms of national and world events. As we contemplate the daily turmoil on the Mexico/US border, we can take note that Colescott observed in 1997 that this painting is about “human relations at the border. The will to get along in honesty and understanding is not about language differences. It’s about character and perception.”
Assassin Down, 1968–1970

Acrylic on Egyptian linen

Dallas Museum of Art, TWO x TWO for AIDS and Art Fund, L2019.104.32

In this painting, and Kitchen Assassination, Colescott offers a more literal interpretation of two tragedies that forever transformed American’s sense of stability: the 1963 assassination of President John Fitzgerald Kennedy and that of his brother Robert Kennedy in 1968, who was in the midst of his campaign for the presidency of the United States. Assassin Down presents Colescott’s version of the murder of JFK’s assassin Lee Harvey Oswald by Jack Ruby as Oswald was being escorted in police custody. Kitchen Assassination captures the moment when Sirhan Sirhan fired the shots that killed RFK. In both compositions, it is interesting to note the presence of the black figures. While they play a key role in the 1980s history paintings, here they are relegated to the margins of the narrative in service roles. It was this positioning of blacks in history that Colescott sought to redress a few years later in works such as George Washington Carver Crossing the Delaware: A Lesson in American History (1975).
Knowledge of the Past Is the Key to the Future: Matthew Henson and the Quest for the North Pole, 1986

Acrylic on canvas

Albritton Collection, L2019.104.30
Knowledge of the Past is the Key to the Future: Upside Down Jesus and the Politics of Survival, 1987

Acrylic on canvas

Museum Purchase: Robert Hale Ellis Jr. Fund for the Blanche Eloise Day Ellis and Robert Hale Ellis Memorial Collection, 88.3
Knowledge of the Past is the Key to the Future: The Other Washingtons, 1987

Acrylic on canvas

Pick a Ninny Rose, 1999
Acrylic on canvas
Albritton Collection, L2019.104.29
School Days, 1988
Acrylic on canvas

The specter of the figure in a red sweater at the left of the composition, who points a gun at the viewer, is a powerful evocation of events that have shaken American society too often over the last few years. Perhaps the alienation that is seen as a cause of school shootings is indicated by the fact that the relationship between the figures is random. Each one of the individual figures seems to be an independent entity absorbed in their individual stories. Scale and perspective are immaterial as we see the large reclining figure with a gunshot wound in his chest to the right; the male student nonchalantly points a gun directly out towards the spectator to the right; the anomalous bi-colored nude female who dominates the space just off center. Her large head on a relatively slim body is eerily reminiscent of one of Gauguin’s figural sculptures, such as Tahitian Girl of 1890 in the collection of the Nasher Sculpture Center.
In 1964, Colescott applied for a position at the American Research Center in Cairo, Egypt and became the first artist-in-residence at the Center in the fall of that year. Traveling to Egypt was perhaps the most pivotal turning point in Colescott’s life and career. He was immediately enamored with his new environment, which was very different from the cool, lush Pacific Northwest where he had lived for the past several years. It felt like the change that he had been seeking.
Homage to Delacroix: Liberty Leading the People, 1976

Acrylic on canvas

Courtesy of Arlene Schnitzer, L2020.11.1

This painting is not an outrageous satire, although it includes humorous elements. One figure lifts the hem of Liberty’s dress, and a chorus line of dancing girls is visible in the distance along the right edge. Originally, the painting included a humorous caption stenciled in at the top, “IF ONLY SHE HAD WORN HER LIBERTY BRASSIERE,” but Colescott subsequently painted it out, and the original title of the painting was *Billboard Rejected by the Liberty Brassiere Corporation*. The painting is a tribute to one of Colescott’s favorite artists. Delacroix often included allegorical figures, who represent ideas rather than actual people—like the central figure in this painting—and Colescott did the same in many of his own paintings.
Fat Without Guilt, 1981

Acrylic on canvas
Loan courtesy of Dane Nelson from the Collection of Ed Cauduro, L2020.9

During the late 1970s and early ’80s, Colescott created a series of paintings and watercolors inspired by sculptures. He appropriated sculptures from antiquity through the modern era, by such artists as James Earle Fraser, Auguste Rodin, Sargent Johnson, and Frank Stella. The central figure in Fat Without Guilt is derived from Michelangelo’s Dying Slave, which is usually interpreted as an expression of Michelangelo’s Neo-Platonic spiritual ideas. Dying Slave seems to depict the figure’s spirit escaping his body through the wound in his chest, like the air escaping from a balloon. Colescott has taken Michelangelo’s sculpture and transformed it into a symbol of the overconsumption and waste that is so prevalent in our society.
Alas, Jandava, 1998

Acrylic on canvas

Private collection, USA, L2019.104.66
Vincent Van Gogh, *The Potato Eaters, Nuenen*, April–May 1885, Oil on canvas, 32.3 × 44.9 inches, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation)
Jessie Willcox Smith, illustration for *Hans Brinker; or the Silver Skates: A Story of Life in Holland*, in *Boys and Girls of Bookland* by Nora Archibald Smith, 1923, published by David McKay Company, Philadelphia
Cover for *Uncle Tom’s Cabin: Young Folk’s Edition*, 1905, Published by M.A. Donohue & Co., Chicago
Tex Avery, *Swing Shift Cinderella*, 1945
Rebecca Of Sunnybrook Farm, 1938 TCF film with Shirley Temple and Bill Robinson
Amos and Andy played by white actors (radio) and black actors (television)
Robert Kennedy Lying on the Floor