



Isaka Shamsud-Din (American, born 1940)

Rock of Ages, 1976

Oil, gold leaf, and mirror on canvas

48 1/2 x 35 1/2 inches

Gift of Damon Tempey

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Isaka Shamsud-Din is an artist, educator, and activist who has been capturing the lives, histories, and cultures of African American and African diaspora peoples in his paintings, drawings, murals, teachings, and community projects for most of his 77 years. His intensely colorful paintings, from portraits to murals, draw on his experiences growing up and living in Portland, Oregon, and on his extensive research into African American history. Through his art, he intends to “illuminate, educate, and fascinate the viewer.”

Shamsud-Din decided to become an artist when he noticed, at an early age, the absence of representations of African American people in visual culture. As a second-grader, he was asked to trace a coloring book using glass slides. “I was never consciously aware of wanting to be an artist until then. That project had an impact on me, because I became aware that all the human characters were white—and I wasn’t.” His frustration increased as he became older and sought artwork portraying Black people. “[When] I was a sophomore in high school I found black and white reproductions of African American artworks at the library. The works gave a negative image of the black experience, unchallenging of white supremacy. It had a strong, negative effect on my wanting to be an artist. I was in real turmoil over it, because I thought that in order to be successful with selling, I was going to have to adhere to a happy black person or paint a nice, romantic picture of a slum. I didn’t want to be an artist, but I had to. I made up my mind that I would concentrate on black folks around me, now and those that came before.”

Shamsud-Din has created murals and large-scale paintings portraying African American history with a special focus on the Northwest. He collaborated with five other artists on the Albina Mural Project, which hung on the exterior walls of the Albina Human Resources Center in Northeast Portland from 1978 to 1983. (It was removed to protect it from further damage from the damp climate.) The mural depicted different points in African American history: the African slave trade, the migration of Black settlers to the Northwest, the movement of African American workers and their families to Portland in the 1940s to work in the war effort, the disastrous Vanport flood of 1948, and the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. Shamsud-Din drew inspiration from the “Wall of Respect” in Chicago created by members of the Organization of Black American Culture (OBAC) as well as from the work of Mexican mural artists such as Diego Rivera: “The visibility of mural art was one of the things that motivated me. To be able to present your work to an audience that’s not select, that is an everyday, everybody type of audience. In a public place.” Other large-scale works include *Bilalian Odyssey*, a history painting installed at the Oregon Convention Center, which celebrates the contributions of African American people in the American West.

Shamsud-Din’s more intimate paintings of people and scenes from his own life reflect this same drive to convey the richness and diversity of African American lives. *Rock of Ages*, shown here, is a portrait of Shamsud-Din’s father, Isaac Edward Allen, Sr., at the age of 76. Shamsud-Din describes his father as “a master farmer, a magician with soils, raising bountiful crops in 1947 without motorized equipment, with horses and mules in the backwoods of Queen City, in northeast Texas... We were self-sustaining and independent.” In 1947, a mob of white men beat and nearly killed Allen. When Allen recovered, he traveled north to settle in Vanport City, Oregon, where his wife, Geneva Jenkins, and their 10 children joined him. One year later, the family lost everything in the Vanport Flood and moved to Portland. Allen became a landscaper, and the young Shamsud-Din frequently accompanied him to work. In his later years, Allen moved to San Bernardino, California, where he is depicted in this painting, surrounded by his own lush garden, the fruits of his labor.

Allen’s thick-veined, hard-working hands appear at the foreground of the painting. His eyes are softly set, yet gaze directly at the viewer. To his right, at eye level, a small mirror is adhered to the painting. For Shamsud-Din, the mirror is a gesture and invitation to share and exchange the gaze of his father. Gold leaf frames the painting which in every way honors the man who, Shamsud-Din writes, “was the first to encourage and support my growth and development as an artist.”

Isaka Shamsud-Din lives and works in Portland, Oregon.

Discussion and Activities

1. Name all of the colors you see in this painting. How do you feel as you look at them? What mood do they convey?
2. Describe Isaac Allen’s appearance and expression in this portrait. How does this painting confront white supremacy and challenge the absences and stereotypes that Shamsud-Din perceived in visual culture?
3. Why do you think Shamsud-Din includes a mirror in this painting? How does his use of the mirror compare with George Johanson’s representations of mirrors in *Under the Volcano*, also included in the Poster Project?
4. Compare *Rock of Ages* to *Los Frutos del Trabajo (The Fruits of Labor)*, by Diego Rivera, also included in the Poster Project. What similarities and differences do you notice between these two works? How does each work understand and represent “the fruits of labor”?
5. What is the meaning of the painting’s title, *Rock of Ages*? Who or what represents a “rock of ages” in your life? Create a work of art that pays tribute to them. Consider the setting, surrounding objects, colors, and materials that would best express their personality and your relationship to them.

Special thanks to Isaka Shamsud-Din for sharing his **Juneteenth Calendar: Celebrating the Black Experience**, which was an important source for this essay.

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