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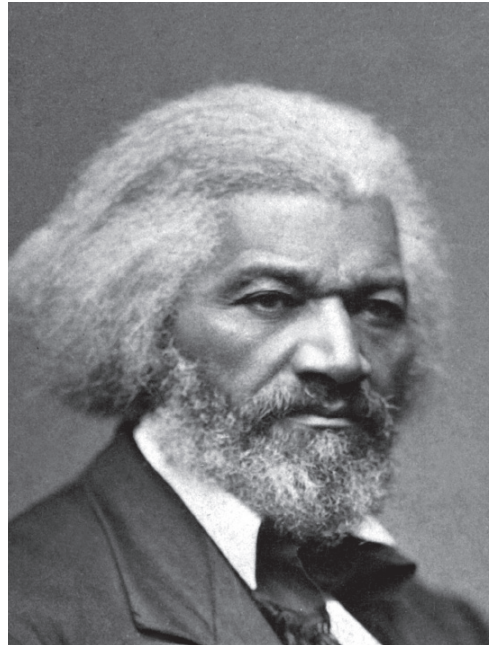
19th & 20th Century American Sculpture



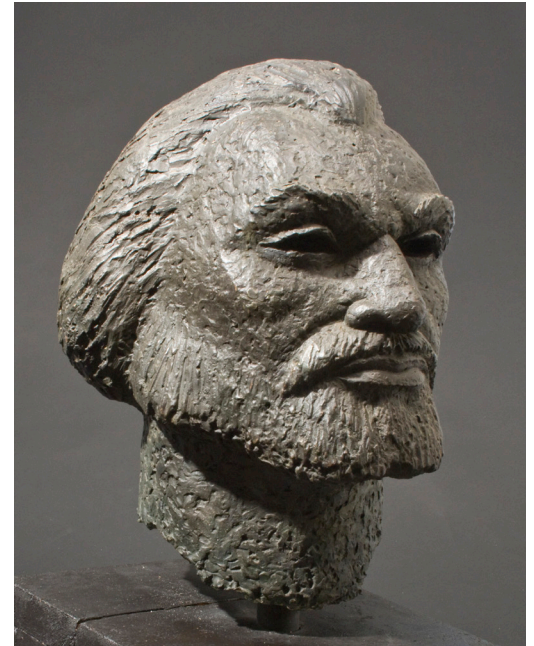
Henry "Mike" Bannarn (1910-1965)

Born in Wetumka, Oklahoma on July 17, 1910 Henry "Mike" Bannarn moved to Minnesota with his family when he was two years old. He began drawing and sculpting in high school where the fine quality of his early works earned him a full scholarship to the Minneapolis School of Fine Arts (now the Minneapolis College of Arts and Design). Upon hearing that Bannarn was denied a scholarship to the University of Minnesota based on his race, James Ford Bell, president of General Mills and Minneapolis resident, saw to it that the promising young artist was given the opportunity to study anywhere he pleased. Bannarn's desire to "learn more about the spirit and tribulations of African-Americans in the US"¹ led him to choose New York's Harlem over the more established art centers of Europe.

In the early 1930s in New York, Bannarn furthered his formal training at the Beaux Arts Institute of Design and at the Art Students' League where he studied with direct carver Ahron Ben-Shmuel, (1903-1984). Combining the formal training he received in both Minnesota and New York with his own distinct creative vision and selfless encouragement of young black artists, Bannarn quickly emerged as an important figure of the early Harlem Renaissance. At the time few



Frederick Douglass, c. 1881



FREDERICK DOUGLASS, c. 1936, painted plaster, 17 ½ x 14 x 14 ¼ in, Norton Museum of Art

opportunities were available in Harlem for arts education. Established in 1931, Augusta Savage's (1892-1962) studio was one of the first to offer aspiring artists classes in painting and sculpture. Initially held in Savage's own studio at 163 West 43rd Street, interest in the program and the growing number of students soon required a move to larger quarters at 239 West 135th Street. The Harlem Art Workshop, established in 1933 under the direction of the Works Progress Administration, was located at the 135th Street branch of the New York Public Library. Headed by James Wells (1902-1993) and Palmer Hayden (1890-1973) the fine arts component of the workshop was relocated, again due to the growing number of students, to a former nightclub at 207 West 136th Street. In 1933 Wells returned to his teaching position



CLEOTA, 1932, painted plaster, 17 x 7 ¼ x 9 ¼ in, Minneapolis Institute of Art, Minnesota



JOHN BROWN, 1940, Minnesota limestone, Howard University Art Gallery, Washington, D.C.



MIDWIFE (*Breath of Life*), c. 1940, wood, 16 ⅝ x 8 ¼ x 5 in, Hood Museum at Dartmouth College, New Hampshire



DAYWORK, c. 1940, Limestone, 15 x 8 ½ x 7 ¾ in, Clark Atlanta University Art Galleries, Georgia

at Howard University leaving the direction of the program to painter Charles Alston (1907-1977). Alston and Bannarn again relocated the workshop a year later to more spacious quarters at 306 West 141st Street. The “306” as it became known, was “the main center in Harlem for creative black people in all the arts”² and Bannarn was regarded as one of it’s most able and dedicated teachers. Among the aspiring young artists he mentored were Romare Bearden (1911-1988), Norman Lewis (1909-1979), and Jacob Lawrence (1917-2000) who later recalled Bannarn’s influence “I rented a space from Mike and learned a great deal just being around him. He had a lot of experience, having gone through a regular formal art education program in Minnesota, Bannarn knew about printmaking, sculpture, and various other media.”³ Elton Fax (1909-1993), illustrator, author, and fellow teacher at the “306” recalled Bannarn as being “... magnetic. Young artists gravitated toward him like bees around a hive.”⁴ Adding to this profile, Bannarn’s daughter recalled that he

“...liked nothing better than to teach and encourage young black artists.... He had no

intellectual or artistic limits. Books were everywhere. He never stopped learning or encouraging others to do the same. This is probably because in his lifetime, an opportunity for education was never a given – it had to be taken full advantage of.”⁵

As an artist, Bannarn possessed a deep social conscience, favoring subjects emblematic of the African-American experience. One of his most powerful sculptures is *Lynch Victim*, c. 1940, (unlocated), the torso of a hanged man carved from the natural fork of an applewood branch – stylistically blending figuration and abstraction. *Midwife*, c. 1940, (Hood Museum of Art), and *Daywork*, c. 1940, (Clark Atlanta University Art Museum) both demonstrate his affinity for carving rather than modeling and for ordinary working class subjects.

Lamenting the lack of African-American history in public school education, Bannarn told the New York Amsterdam News in 1937

“They know about George Washington ... and not about Crispus Attucks – about Admiral Perry and not Matt Henson” “This is not as it should be. I want to be a means of them knowing the Attuckses, the Hensons, the Pushkins and the Douglasses. I will

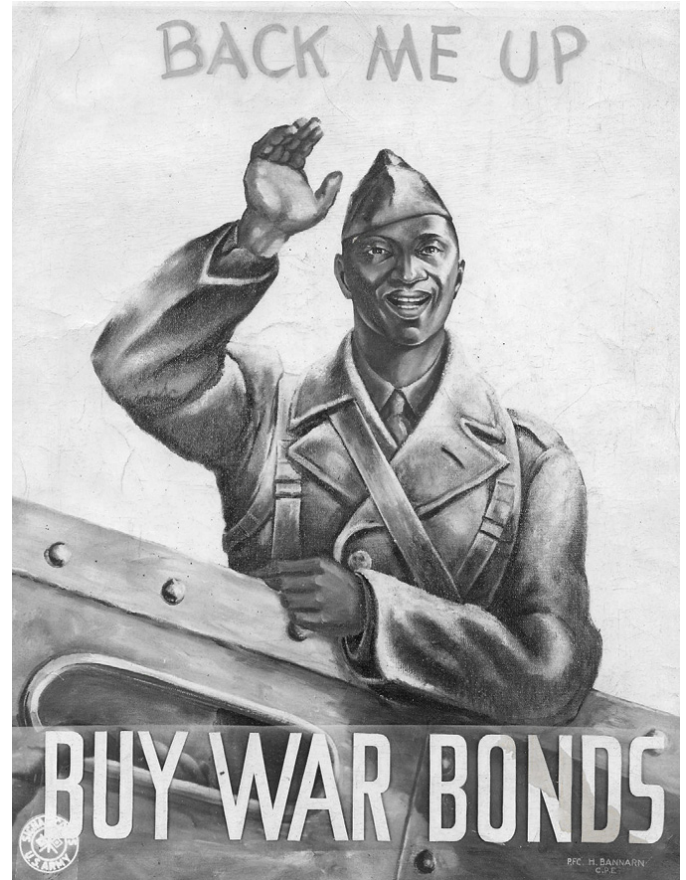


ROWHOUSES, CHARLESTON, SOUTH CAROLINA, 1943, oil on board, 18 x 24 inches, Conner • Rosenkranz

*not rest until they do ... I want to contribute in the field of art to the culture of the Negro in the same manner that the subjects I portray have contributed to Negro culture and the general culture of America"*⁶

In 1936 Bannarn was commissioned by Howard University to execute a bust of abolitionist, orator, and statesman Frederick Douglass (c. 1818-1895) in black marble.⁷ It is unclear if the commission was ever carried out although a plaster model of the Douglass portrait, formerly on long-term loan to the Schomburg Collection, remained in the estate of the artist. In 1938 Howard University's Theta Chapter of Phi Delta Kappa Sorority commissioned Bannarn to model a portrait of the first African-American arctic explorer and the first African-American member of the Explorers Club, Matthew Henson, who accompanied Robert Peary on twenty arctic expeditions spanning two decades.⁸ *Portrait of Matthew Henson* remains in the Howard University Gallery of Art Library.

Returning to Minnesota in 1940, Bannarn used his backyard as a sculpture studio, working with materials that he could find locally. Stone from an abandoned quarry was



WAR BONDS POSTER, c. 1944

transformed into *Daywork* and *John Brown*, 1940, Howard University Art Gallery, a dead apple tree provided the branch for his *Lynch Victim*. Bannarn's production of sculpture and painting that year was sufficient to mount a one-man exhibition at the Harriet Hanley Gallery in Minneapolis. The Director of the Minneapolis Arts Institute, Russell A. Plimpton, selected three works from the Henley exhibition to be included in the Institute's annual Local Artist's Exhibition. Awards were given for Bannarn's entries in sculpture and watercolor. Four years later Plimpton acquired Bannarn's watercolor *The Smoker*, c. 1944, for the Minneapolis Arts Institute's permanent collection.

Inducted into the Army c. 1940, Bannarn's painting skills were put to use as a member of the Army's Special Services Division at



CITY LIGHTS, NY, c. 1957, oil on canvas, 30 x 48 inches, Conner • Rosenkranz

Camp Plauche, Harahan, Louisiana where he created a series of murals depicting soldiers on furlough in various theaters of operation. For his post at Charleston Port of Embarkation, South Carolina he completed murals depicting American soldiers on leave around the world. His work for the Division extended to recruitment and war bond posters, the first such service and support images to depict African-American soldiers as a fighting men. Bannarn continued to paint on his own time, mounting an exhibition at the Byrne Street USO, Petersburg Virginia, in 1942. The program included a lecture by Alonzo Aden, curator at Howard University Gallery of Art, and was presided over by Miss Amaza Lee

Meredith, head of the Department of Art at Virginia State College. Bannarn's *Rowhouses, Charleston South Carolina*, 1943 was completed during this productive period.

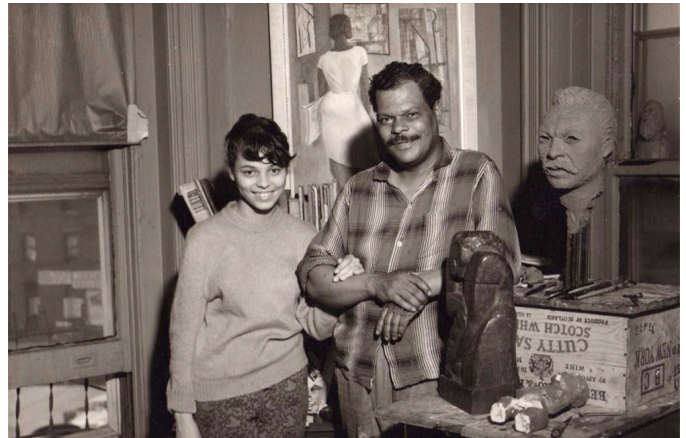
Bannarn exhibited both painting and sculpture regularly throughout his career. Starting in 1928, at age 18, his painting entry to the Minnesota State Fair Art Exhibition was awarded first prize; thirteen years later his sculpture entry to the State Fair Exhibition won a first premium award. In 1932 his entries at the Minneapolis Institute of Art received awards for sculpture and watercolor. At the Harmon Foundation's Fifth Exhibition of Negro Art in 1933, Bannarn exhibited a *Male Torso* (unlocated) along side works by

fellow sculptors Richmond Barthé (1901-1989) and William Artis (1914-1977). Other exhibitions followed including annuals at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, (1934; 1936), (Bannarn was the first African-American to exhibit at PAFA since Henry O. Tanner); the Baltimore Museum of Art, 1939; Newtown Gallery, Arthur University, Chicago, *American Negro Exhibition*, 1940; Atlanta University, 1943, 1944, 1945, and 1948, among others.

Bannarn is represented in several public collections; Hood Museum, *Midwife*, c. 1940; Clark Atlanta University Art Museum, *Daywork*, c. 1940; and Minneapolis Institute of Arts *Cleota Collins*, 1932. Collins, an accomplished African-American opera singer, performed with the Metropolitan Opera from 1912 to 1920 and was a founding member of the National Association of Negro Musicians, an organization whose goal was to raise the standard of music instruction and to promote the work of black musicians and composers. Most recently, from a private collection, Bannarn's large oil on canvas *Modernist Exhibition*, c. 1957, has been on view at the Birmingham Museum of Art, Alabama.

Around 1949 Bannarn returned to New York working first from his home studio in the Bensonhurst section of Brooklyn then, three years later, a brownstone in Bedford Stuyvesant on the corner of Lafayette and Marcy Streets. From his fourth floor studio he recorded the demolition of a neighboring building in his painting *Sam's Luncheonette*, c. 1953. The night lights of Manhattan, dotting the cityscape across the East River and visible from his studio window, inspired his painting *City Lights*, c. 1953. Henry "Mike" Bannarn contracted cancer and, in 1965, passed away in his home.

Mark Ostrander, 2017



Henry "Mike" Bannarn with his eldest daughter Hassie in his Brooklyn, NY studio, c. 1960-61. On the wall behind Bannarn is *Modernist Exhibition* c. 1955, private collection. On the workbench is *Midwife*, c. 1940, Hood Museum at Dartmouth College, Hanover, New Hampshire and, on it's back, a Marquesan Basalt Tiki figure replica which Bannarn used as a model for his painting *Oceanic Sculpture*, c. 1934-39. The portrait sculpture is of Gordon Parks, nd. unlocated.



MODERNIST EXHIBITION, c. 1957, oil on canvas, private collection, currently on view at the Birmingham Museum of Art

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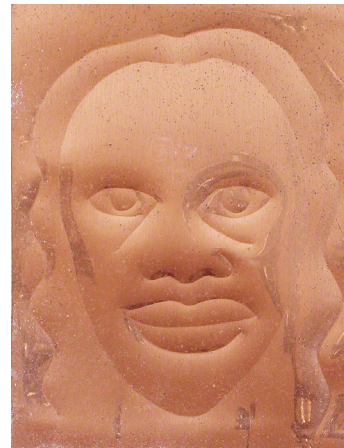
1. Recollections by the artist's daughter, c. 1995
2. Bearden, Romare and Harry Henderson, *History of African-American Artists*, p. 260
3. Samella Lewis, *Jacob Lawrence*, *Black Art: an International Quarterly*: 5, no. 3 (1982): 8.
4. Donaldson, Jeff, *Generation "306"*, Northwestern University, 1974, p.112
5. Recollections by the artist's daughter, c. 1995
6. Marvel Cooke, "Carving for Posterity," *New York Amsterdam News*, November 12, 1937.
7. An uncredited reference from 1936 states "Recently, he [Bannarn] started a bust in black marble of Frederick Douglass, Negro, and one of the founders of the Republican Party, for the alumni of Howard University". The commission was also referenced in Gilpin, R. Blakeslee; *John Brown Still Lives: America's long Reckoning with Violence, Equality, & Change*, University of North Carolina Press, 2011, p. 161.
8. Robert Peary met Matthew Henson in 1886 while outfitting for an expedition to Nicaragua. Upon learning that Henson had six years of seagoing experience Peary offered him a position. Henson would remain Peary's "first man" and a critical member of his team for over twenty subsequent expeditions into Greenland and the North Pole.

Selected exhibitions:

- 1928; Minnesota State Fair.
- 1932; Minneapolis Institute of Arts.
- 1933; Harmon Foundation Fifth Exhibition of Negro Art.
- 1934; 129th Annual Exhibition of painting and Sculpture, Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Art, Philadelphia.
- 1936; 131st Annual Exhibition of painting and Sculpture, Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Art, Philadelphia.
- 1939; Baltimore Museum of Art.
- 1940; American Negro Exhibition.
- 1940; *Minnesota Artists Association Annual*, Minneapolis Institute of the Arts.
- 1940; *Solo Exhibition*, Harriet Hanly Gallery, Minneapolis Minnesota.
- 1941; *Twin City Artists*, Saint Paul Gallery and School of Art.
- 1941; Minnesota State Fair, 1st premium award in sculpture.
- 1943; *2nd Annual Exhibition of Paintings, Sculpture, and Prints by Negro Artists*, Atlanta University.
- 1944; *3rd Annual Exhibition of Paintings, Sculpture, and Prints by Negro Artists: The Two Generations*, Atlanta University.
- 1945; Newtown Gallery at Arthur University, Chicago.
- 1945; *4th Annual Exhibition of Paintings, Sculpture, and Prints by Negro Artists*, Atlanta University.
- c. 1945-47; Minneapolis Institute of Arts 32nd Local Artists Exhibition.
- 1948; *7th Annual Exhibition of Paintings, Sculpture, and Prints by Negro Artists*, Atlanta University.
- 1973; *Highlights from the Atlanta University Collection of Afro-American Art*, High Museum of Art, Atlanta, Georgia.
- 1981; *The Neglected Generation of American Realist painters: 1930-1948*, Wichita Art Museum, Wichita, Kansas



OCEANIC SCULPTURE, (Marquesan Basalt Tiki figure), c. 1957, oil on canvas, 36 x 20 inches, Conner • Rosenkranz



PORTRAIT, c. 1946-48, engraved copper sheet, 4 1/2 x 3 1/2 inches, private collection.

Selected References:

- Locke, Alain, *The Negro in Art*, New York Hacker Art Books, [reprint] 1979.
- Bearden, Romare and Harry Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists From 1792 To The Present*. Pantheon Books, 1993.
- Bibby, Deirdre L. *Augusta Savage and The Art Schools of Harlem*. New York: Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library, 1998.
- Powell, Richard, *To Conserve A Legacy: American Art From Historically Black Colleges and Universities*. MIT Press, 1999.
- Hills, Patricia, *Painting Harlem Modern: The Art of Jacob Lawrence*. University of California Press, 2009. (specifically chapter 1, Harlem's Artists Communities in the 1930's)

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