

ART

Black Artists at Newark Museum

By JOHN CALDWELL

NEWARK

ON FEB. 6, the Newark Museum, in a tribute to Black History Month, opened an exhibition called "Black Artists." The show, which will remain on view until May 15, is drawn from works in the museum's permanent collection and contains some important and beautiful art.

Perhaps the first question one asks oneself when approaching an exhibit like this is whether there is some common quality in the works it contains that sets them off as the products of artists who were black.

Such a common thread is easy to find in, say, black music. However, based on the Newark show and others like it at the Metropolitan and Brooklyn Museums a few years back, one is hard-pressed to find anything at all that links the works of art.

Between the assured abstraction of Robert Reid's "Falling Series, #2,3,4,5" of 1969 and Joshua Johnston's portrait of Isabel Taylor (about 1805), it is extremely hard to find any common ground whatever.

In fact, the show demonstrates rather conclusively that black art has been astonishingly various, that there has been no particular stylistic idiom that has especially appealed to American blacks or seemed especially natural or sympathetic. Black artists have worked well and achieved fine and not-so-fine results in virtually every artistic style that has emerged over several hundred years.

One also looks for some insight into black culture, and here the results are a little more definite. Especially in the 1930's, when the prevailing style in America was social realism, black artists created some quite wonderful evocations of the lives of their people.

In a lithograph entitled "Evolution of Swing," Raymond Steth, an artist about whom regrettably little seems to be known, created a marvelously complex composition of African motifs with images of the rural South and urban North. Two prints by Claude Clark, "In the Groove" and "Boogie-Woogie," are like Mr. Steth's work in that the power of black music was used to produce witty, energetic and appealing images of black America.

Much later, in 1972, Ben Jones, a New Jersey artist, painted a strange and rivetingly powerful icon to black music in his "High Priestess of Soul," an act of homage to Nina Simone, the singer.

Using glitter and tinsel, he has given Miss Simone patterns over her hair and face that are reminiscent of African face-painting and marking. It is a strong but disturbing work that seems to incorporate some of the out-of-control emotions of its subject.

Another element of black culture that emerges from the exhibition is simply how hard it was to be a black artist in America. For example, Joshua Johnston's works are rare and precious, far more so than those of other portrait painters of early-19th century America, and one concludes from this that he had a more difficult time getting work.

And we know that Henry Ossawa

Tanner, a student of Thomas Eakins's in late-19th century Philadelphia, found the role of American black artist difficult. In response, Tanner became an expatriate and spent most of his life in France.

The Johnston and Tanner paintings in the show bring up another difficult issue: Visitors who do not know their work well should beware of judging them as artists on the basis of the single pieces exhibited here.

Johnston's portrait of Isabel Taylor is far from being among his best paintings. The artist's portraits of children, especially his group portraits, are among the most exquisite in American 19th-century art, and they display an elegance and refinement that are sadly lacking in Miss Taylor. A white woman, she looks a little bit unfinished, perhaps because she refused to give the artist an adequate number of sittings.

Although Tanner fares a bit better, his "The Good Shepherd" is small and lacking in the emotional power of his best work. Naturally, one cannot blame the Newark Museum for this falling off in quality; after all, the show is drawn from its permanent collection, and the two most important black artists of the 19th and early-20th centuries could not be omitted from the exhibition simply because the museum did not possess major works by them.

In the case of Edward M. Bannister, the situation may be somewhat different. His two drawings, "Sea With Sails" and "Landscape, Field With Flowers," are so minor that they do this artist, who lived from 1828 to 1901,

a disservice.

Here again, the museum is hardly at fault. After suffering neglect in their own time, black American artists of the 19th century became highly fashionable in the 1960's and 70's and their work began to bring exceptionally high prices. Perhaps one should say that the museum is lucky to possess anything at all by Bannister.

The 20th century has been better for black artists, and the exhibition makes that clear. First of all, there is simply a great deal more work by many more artists.

My candidate for best in show would have to be Romare Bearden, who is represented by three works, all of them very strong. His "Dream" is a nude woman sleeping, a strongly composed form against a powerfully colored background.

"Storyville Scene" has the vagueness, mystery and power of a dream. A female inhabitant of the New Orleans district devoted to prostitution hangs over the chair of a piano player, and one can almost hear the blues.

The real surprise of the exhibition is a small, undated landscape by Bearden that is extraordinarily elegant and assured in both its forms and coloring. It is inscribed "To Irving" and the museum currently knows almost nothing about it, a situation that its curator, Fearn Thurlow, plans to rectify in the near future.

All in all, it is a very interesting exhibition, one for which the curator and the museum deserve praise.

The museum, at 49 Washington Street, is open daily from noon to 5 P.M. Admission is free.



"High Priestess of Soul," by Ben Jones