

## Labored Stereotypes

### *Palmer Hayden's The Janitor Who Paints*

John Ott

Palmer Hayden's *The Janitor Who Paints* (fig. 1) has long baffled students of African American art. Today the work features relatively flattering portraits of a black painter, woman, and child, but the canvas originally contained the garish and inflammatory characteristics of Jim Crow caricature (fig. 2). Hayden publicly exhibited that first, more troubling version of the painting at the Baltimore Museum of Art in 1939, and only later decided to revise it. Consequently, some contemporary scholars have criticized him for internalizing prevailing stereotypes and uncritically recycling them in this and related paintings. For example, in the book *Harlem Renaissance: Art of Black America* (1987), Mary Schmidt Campbell writes:

*Hayden's deliberately self-effacing interpretation of his efforts as an artist, his insistence on portraying Blacks with the masks of the minstrels—that is, as performers for a White audience—and his ingratiating reference to the benevolence of his liberators, are probably honest . . . portrayals of Hayden's very real feeling about his efforts at making art. As such, they are poles apart from Meta Fuller's aristocratic defiance and political sophistication.*

These kinds of critiques, which suggest that Hayden's work at times perpetuated the racisms of a dominant culture, have pushed him to the margins of African American art history.<sup>1</sup>

Such evaluations contrast sharply with the artist's statements about the painting. In an interview with Romare Bearden in May 1969, he said he had intended it as a tribute to Cloyd Boykin, a fellow painter who, like Hayden, worked as a janitor while pursuing an artistic career. "It's a sort of protest painting," he explained. "I painted it because no one called Boykin the artist. They called him the janitor." While the intervening years and struggle for civil rights might have rose-colored the artist's recollections, it is striking that this interpretation of *The Janitor Who Paints* as social protest has largely faded from the art-historical record.<sup>2</sup>

Whether or not *Janitor* constitutes a portrait of Boykin, I concur with historian Jeffrey Stewart, who maintains that "conflict, misunderstanding, and defiance better characterize the highly-charged relationships between black artists and white patrons than compliance and acquiescence." There is evidence that through this canvas Hayden actually advanced a sharp and multifaceted critique of the ways in which his longtime institutional patron, the Harmon Foundation, stereotyped African American artists.

- 1 Palmer Hayden, *The Janitor Who Paints*, ca. 1937 / repainted after 1940. Oil, 39 1/8 x 32 7/8 in. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of the Harmon Foundation



The painting ultimately served as a satirical commentary on his own packaging by white patrons and art critics. In addition, it shrewdly participated in larger period debates about African American aesthetics.<sup>3</sup>

Born Peyton Cole Hedgeman in Widewater, Virginia, Palmer Hayden (1890–1973) spent his young adulthood in the army. He was stationed for three years in the Philippines and later worked as a liveryman at West Point Academy during World War I. After his discharge from the military, however, he moved to Greenwich Village and pursued a career in the fine arts. While Hayden was partly self-trained, most of the literature about him has overlooked or diminished the often informal but nonetheless academic art education he received in the early twenties at Columbia University, the Cooper Institute, and the Boothbay Art Colony in Maine. While pursuing his sporadic art training, he worked as a postal clerk, a janitor, and in a variety of part-time jobs, including cleaning the studio of Cooper Institute instructor Victor Perard. Yet he also



- 2 Original version of Palmer Hayden, *The Janitor Who Paints*, ca. 1937. Published in Alain Locke, *The Negro in Art* (Associates in Negro Folk Education, 1940), 43

Works Progress Administration, from 1934 until 1940. It is within this context that he created *The Janitor Who Paints*. Most exhibition catalogues from the period date the canvas to 1937; the artist's revision of the work must have occurred sometime after 1940.<sup>5</sup>

Despite his training and European exposure, the period press unflinchingly foregrounded Hayden's freelance employment as an urban janitor to make sense of his artistic production. A *New York Times* review of the 1926 Harmon exhibition typifies this pattern of criticism:

*For years Palmer C. Hayden, a negro, has been cleaning houses and washing windows to make a living, and during his spare time has gone back to his room at 29 Greenwich Avenue to dabble in oil colors and paint coast and river scenes which appealed to him. Yesterday he received the first prize in fine arts from the Harmon Foundation. . . . He painted for the joy of it, and not because he hoped to win any great appreciation of his efforts.*

Here the writer lauds his subject less for his artistic merits than for his status and achievements as an art-world outsider, a "dabbler." For years mainstream critics reiterated Hayden's marginality despite his burgeoning artistic record. In an *Art Digest* review of the 1933 Harmon show, at which Hayden won his second cash prize, a commentator observed that "Mr. Hayden was born in Virginia, served in the army and has

exhibited his artwork at the Society of Independent Artists in 1925 and 1926 and had his first solo show at the Civic Club in April 1926.<sup>4</sup>

Thus Hayden was already developing the résumé of a professional painter when he submitted a marine study entitled *Boothbay Harbor* to the Harmon Foundation's first national competition in 1926. That painting, which drew on recent experiences in Maine, won the gold medal and a four-hundred-dollar prize. Following this recognition, wealthy white philanthropist Alice Dike gave Hayden three thousand dollars to travel overseas and soak up the artistic milieu of Paris. There he spent five years, often in the company of other black émigrés like Hale Woodruff, Alain Locke, and Henry Ossawa Tanner. While abroad Hayden continued to enter paintings in the annual Harmon competitions but would not receive another award until 1933, when his *Fétiche et Fleurs* (fig. 3) took first place. Even though the 1933 exhibition marked the foundation's last prize show, Hayden quickly located alternative means of support, first through the Public Works of Art Project, then the



worked as a postal clerk. At present he is employed as a porter and paints in his spare moments.” A writer for *Time* likewise felt obliged to report that Hayden “was earning his living as a window washer and scrubman on Park Avenue when he won his first art prize.”<sup>6</sup>

It was not only critics who indelibly defined Hayden as a lowly laborer and art hobbyist. Close scrutiny of Harmon Foundation papers reveals that his staunchest institutional supporters consistently undersold the painter to the public. From its first press release, the foundation labeled the inaugural recipient of the William E. Harmon Award for Distinguished Achievement in Fine Arts, contrary to the facts of his career, as an untutored amateur, stating: “Palmer C. Hayden, a house-cleaner jobber in Greenwich Village . . . while making his living doing odd work in general cleaning he has devoted his spare time for several years to the brush, and previously his art work has come to the attention of but few outside his circle of acquaintances.”<sup>7</sup> The author further misrepresents Hayden as terra incognita awaiting discovery by the Harmon competition. From this point forward, foundation publications invariably listed Hayden first and most prominently among its many awardees in literature, science, education, religion, business, and music. He became the emerging “poster child”—the idiom nicely if rather bluntly captures the organization’s paternalism—for the Harmon Foundation’s highly publicized largesse.

Its archives demonstrate, furthermore, that the organizational leadership deliberately scripted its pet grantee in the role of humble naïf. George Haynes, a sociologist who was commissioner of race relations of the Federal Council of the Churches of Christ in America, administered the numerous Harmon prizes from 1925 to 1930. After Hayden received the supplemental gift from Alice Dike to study abroad, Haynes urged the



3 Palmer Hayden, *Fétiche et Fleurs*, 1932–33. Oil, 23 ½ x 29 in. Museum of African American Art, Los Angeles, Gift of Miriam A. Hayden

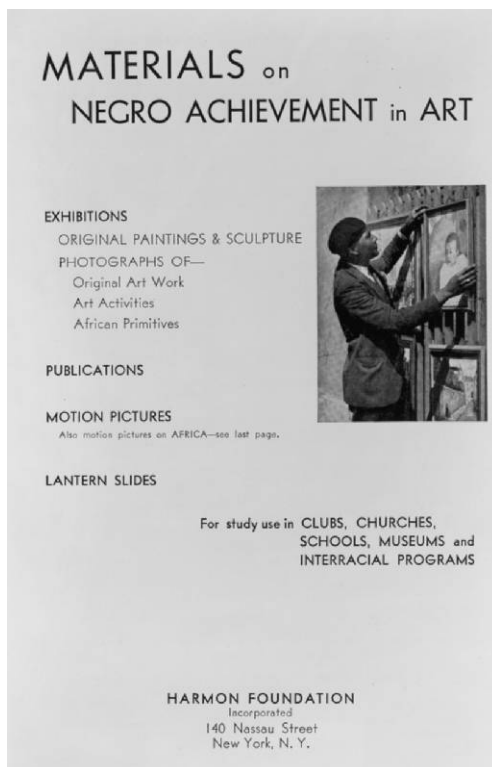
foundation's assistant director to showcase the artist to attract further public support, saying: "[W]hile we want to play up the good fortune and picturesque figure of Hayden's going [to Europe], I am especially desirous that we make this kite carry a heavy tail of our future programs." Elsewhere Haynes frankly asserted that Hayden's "achievement illustrates particularly the sort Mr. Harmon hoped the awards to reach—is highly meritorious but unproven." Soon the Harmon press release "Negro Housecleaner Will Study Art in Europe" was circulating through New York newspapers and art publications alike.<sup>8</sup> The appeal of this mythic account of Hayden's career for the organization's management seems clear: the more humble a recipient's origins and peripheral to mainstream art-world institutions, the more philanthropic the Harmon Foundation's efforts would appear to be.

This stereotype would only harden over the next decade as Hayden remained in the foundation's limelight. His leading role in the educational short film *A Study of Negro Artists* exemplifies his visibility and popularity within the Harmon orbit. Mary Beattie Brady, executive director of the foundation after Harmon's death in 1928, produced the documentary and distributed it to art departments of black colleges for instructional purposes. Even in the late thirties, Hayden continued to star in promotional publications, such as a cameo appearance on the cover of an undated Harmon pamphlet, *Materials on Negro Achievement in Art* (fig. 4).<sup>9</sup>

Throughout this time the Harmon Foundation perpetuated its mythology of "meritorious but unproven" black artists and in so doing greatly diminished grantees' cultural contributions. The 1935 exhibition catalogue *Negro Artists: An Illustrated Review of Their Achievements*, for example, enumerates the following qualities as innate characteristics of the "Negro": "an inheritance of physical strength, a sense of rhythm, optimism and humor, simplicity and aplomb, appreciation of the dignity of honest labor. . . . He sees that America respects achievement."<sup>10</sup> In a worthy but misguided attempt to dispel allegations about the purported laziness of blacks, the foundation effectively foreclosed all possibility of African Americans producing true "art." Rather, the institution charged itself with providing blacks with the opportunity to carry out "honest labor." This language not only constantly reminded Hayden that he needed to supplement income earned from selling paintings but also defined his status as an employee rather than a professional artist.

The foundation carried this emphasis over into its many documentary films. In *A Study of Negro Artists*, the first of four reels features Hayden, Aaron Douglas, Richmond Barthé, Augusta Savage, and James Latimer

- 4 Harmon Foundation, *Materials on Negro Achievement in Art*, undated. Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.
- 5 Palmer Hayden and Beauford Delaney. Still from Harmon Foundation, *A Study of Negro Artists*, ca. 1937. 16 mm film, 40 mins. Harmon Foundation Collection, Motion Picture, Sound, and Video Records, National Archives, College Park, Maryland







Allen engaged in their respective media. After a short opening scene of Hayden painting boats dockside, a title card reads, “Until recognition comes, the artist seeks a living wherever he can.” A rapid montage of African American labor ensues: a mechanic in overalls services a trolley; a driver turns the steering wheel of a taxi; a janitor fills a dustpan with his broom; female hands sew, rapidly finger typewriter keys, and connect calls at a telephone switchboard; a secretary collates and staples paperwork; a postman sorts letters; waiters carry trays; an operator runs an elevator; and a custodian takes a sponge from a bucket, then cleans a squeegee with a rag before dragging it down a windowpane. Except in the case of the mechanic, the director places the subjects’ black hands at the center of the frame and crops their heads entirely out of view. After a second title, “The leisure thus gained leaves him free to work again for fame and recognition,” another swift procession of black hands draw, paint, sculpt, and etch. The film then delves into brief studies of individual artists; for Hayden’s segment, we return to the waterfront, where he “explains his technique to another artist,” Beauford Delaney (fig. 5).<sup>11</sup>

Once again, the Harmon Foundation eclipses African American artistic endeavors with images of black menial employment. The film’s director underscores the manual nature of this opening cavalcade of tasks by fixating on “fine, strong working hands.” In addition, the quick vignettes of manual and artistic work appear identical in terms of their tight point-of-view, rapid editing style, and anonymous presentation of their subjects. By this means, the squeezing of water from a sponge and the molding of clay or the application of squeegee to window and of paint to canvas become synonymous forms of labor (fig. 6). The textual narrative, meanwhile, further implies that for blacks art is a secondary, “leisure”-time activity, but nonetheless “work.” The director’s outline for the film is even more blunt: “The Negro artist today must work with his hands to earn a living; his art is but a spare-time activity.” As an educational film, finally, *A Study of Negro Artists* fails, since the camera focuses more on the faces and bodies of the artists as they work, or on their finished products, than on active processes and techniques that would better serve instructional purposes. Longer scenes in which the camera lingered on Hayden’s canvas as he applies paint became outtakes on the cutting-room floor.<sup>12</sup>

Not all advocates of black artists in the interwar years categorized them as working-class amateurs, however. Compare, for example, descriptions of Hayden in two exhibitions: one staged in 1935 by the Harmon Foundation, the other held in 1934 at the College Art Association and “sponsored by the Harmon Foundation [but] assembled and circulated by the CAA.” Following organizational precedent, the Harmon catalogue prefaces Palmer Hayden’s curriculum vitae with the following biography: “Born in Virginia; educated public schools. Served in army, worked as postal clerk, did window-washing in New York. Painting in spare time.” In the pamphlet for the CAA show, by contrast, the biographical sketch of Hayden contains only his professional training, exhibition history, prizes, and teaching

6 Stills from Harmon Foundation, *A Study of Negro Artists*, ca. 1937. 16 mm film, 40 mins. Harmon Foundation Collection, Motion Picture, Sound, and Video Records, National Archives, College Park, Maryland

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experience. In the introduction, Audrey McMahon directs the reader's attention toward aesthetic quality and away from questions of race: "this exhibition is therefore offered less as a group of work by the members of a particular race than as a contemporary art exhibition of merit and standard."<sup>13</sup>

The Harmon Foundation's marketing of Hayden participated in a much larger trend of marginalizing African American artists in Roosevelt-era America. Among others, art historian Richard Powell has recognized "the art world's then-current fascination with self-trained 'daubers,' 'scribblers,' and 'whittlers,' whose creative lives had been spent (for the most part) outside of the art world proper." Professional black artists struggling for widespread public acclaim and a reliable client base looked on as those with little or no academic training made dramatic debuts in the most prestigious high-art venues. For example, William Edmondson, a vernacular sculptor from Nashville, received the first one-man show by an African American artist at the Museum of Modern Art in New York (MoMA) in 1937. One year later, MoMA featured painter Horace Pippin in the exhibition *Masters of Popular Painting*; following Harmon conventions, the museum catalogue dutifully noted his career as a "house painter" before narrating how his "work was discovered by Dr. Christian Brinton."<sup>14</sup>

Against this backdrop, it becomes easier to see how *The Janitor Who Paints* might operate as both parody of and rebellion against prevailing racial attitudes. Hayden not only casts his protagonist in the familiar role of janitor but also scrupulously includes numerous details regularly reported about him in the press. The cramped space, bare lightbulb, and large hands of the central character all evoke descriptions of Hayden in newspapers, such as this excerpt from a 1926 article in the *New York Evening World* about the artist: "In the gloom of the tiny room, lighted by an oil lamp, Hayden, wearing an orange-colored smock, looked even more gigantic than he is, and the camel-hair brush in his fingers seemed no larger than a toothpick."<sup>15</sup> The painter's oversize hands, meanwhile, recall the tight shots from *A Study of Negro Artists*. The prominent clock near the center of the canvas harkens back to reviewers' emphasis on Hayden's painting as a "spare-time" activity.

Moreover, around this time the figure of the janitor had begun to acquire a larger political resonance within the black community. For many, the African American janitor emblemized limited opportunities within a segregated society, and other black artists working under the New Deal also cited the case study of the custodian to articulate biting social protest. While interning for Roy Stryker at the Farm Security Administration as a Julius Rosenwald Fellow, photographer Gordon Parks assembled an extensive portfolio of images that chronicled the daily routines of FSA charwoman Ella Watson. In the most famous of these, *American Gothic* (fig. 7), Parks ironically mantles the marginalized subject of unskilled black labor in grandiosely patriotic iconography more typical of political campaign propaganda: the oversize flag, the formal portrait pose, the stage lighting, and the frank allusions to Grant Wood's archetypal canvas. In a 1941 article, "Negro Art and the Depression," writer Vernon Winslow mobilizes this same type to criticize the subordination of rural blacks newly migrated to urban centers:

*True enough, the Negro possessed an abundance of abstract scholarship and artistic sensitivity, but he pathetically lacked any means of industrial translation. . . . [N]either would his presence be tolerated, except as a janitor, in any of the experimental laboratories working on tubular furniture, plexi-glass or synthetic fabrics.*<sup>16</sup>

- 7 Gordon Parks, *American Gothic*, 1942. Photograph. Farm Security Administration/Office of War Information Photograph Collection, Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress



In like fashion, Hayden asserts through his work that the presence of blacks in the art world would be tolerated only as janitors, as he well knew from personal experience. The dignity of Parks's portrait, of course, is a far cry from the jolting caricatures of Hayden's original canvas. But the painter, I would argue, avoids simply reproducing and endorsing dominant attitudes about black artists through a number of visual tactics. Not only does he exaggerate racist physiognomy to the point of absurdity, but he also overstates to parodic effect the prevailing equation of black art with manual labor: the two brushes that the protagonist clutches in his left hand rhyme with the broom and duster on the wall behind him, while his palette mirrors the large trashcan lid thrust toward the viewer in the foreground. These strong visual parallels echo the editing techniques of *A Study of Negro Artists*. The later version of *Janitor*, of course, supplants these satirical elements with details that more directly refute period stereotypes about black painters. There the beret functions as the attribute of an accomplished artist, perhaps one who, like Hayden, had traveled abroad. In fact, Hayden often posed for publicity wearing such a beret (see figs. 4, 5), broadcasting his status as a cosmopolitan, professional painter in the face of his typecasting. The neckties that both Hayden and his avatar wear likewise distance black artists from unskilled work.

In the original version of *The Janitor Who Paints* (see fig. 2), Hayden subtly singled out the Harmon Foundation for perpetuating the stereotypes made evident in the painting. The portrait of Abraham Lincoln on the rear wall, at which the protagonist rolls his eyes, crucially pegs Hayden's canvas as a satire of his benefactors. Note that Hayden's substitution of the Great Emancipator for a snoozing tabby is the only major alteration other than the sitters' facial features that he made during his repainting of the picture. This strongly suggests that the artist conceptualized Lincoln and the lurid visages as a mutually interdependent unit. By this pairing, Hayden associates the Sambo of the racist imagination with the revered patron saint of white paternalism. His motivations for drawing this specific connection to the sixteenth president become clear on perusal of Harmon Foundation publicity. Every year, the organization self-consciously opened its award competitions on Lincoln's birthday; its press releases stated that the "awards are to be made January 1st, which is the date on which Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation." During the first year of Harmon art prizes, when Hayden won a gold medal, Haynes even called the award program a "new emancipation." By linking the foundation's presidential mascot to grotesque Jim Crow stereotypes, therefore, the janitor's brush tars white paternalism with the stereotypes of black dependence.<sup>17</sup>

Other African American painters echoed Hayden's censure of white philanthropic influence over the art market. As early as 1934 Romare Bearden argued that white patrons' "effect upon the Negro artist has been disastrous. Take for instance the Harmon Foundation. Its attitude from the beginning has been of a coddling and patronizing nature." A dozen years later, Bearden



elaborated with more specific concerns that accord with Hayden's pictorial rhetoric about the organization:

*But the attitude of the [Harmon] Foundation toward the Negro artists was patronizing; it firmly established the pattern of segregated exhibits; it fostered artificial and arbitrary artistic standards, stemming from a sociological rather than aesthetic interest in the exhibitors' works. This concept of the Negro artist as an odd personality, rather than as a mature individual, has been both insulting and harmful. . . . On another occasion, films were made of some of the Negro painters at work. One of the artists filmed had once been a superintendent of a building in Harlem, so he was asked to stand painting before his easel in a pair of janitor's overalls.<sup>18</sup>*

Although I have not been able to locate the film Bearden refers to here, its imagery and ideology seem identical to the documentary short *A Study of Negro Artists* (see figs. 5, 6). Bearden's cogent objections demonstrate that Hayden's contemporaries were more than capable of publicly condemning philanthropic organizations for subordinating black painters.

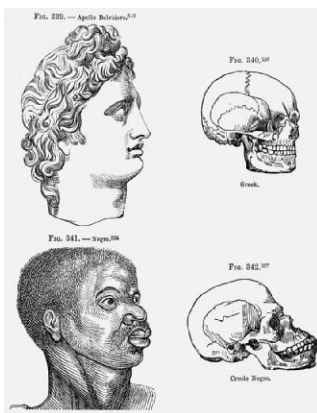
Even Hayden's most hostile African American critics understood the satirical content of his work; their concerns evolved less from outrage at Hayden's provocative imagery than from larger disagreements about appropriate African American aesthetics, subjects, and tactics. Indeed, the initial version of *The Janitor Who Paints* marks but one of many strategies black intellectuals pursued to gain full recognition within the art community. Hayden's efforts only partly dovetailed with the intellectual platform of Alain Locke, the Howard University professor of philosophy who had for decades been tirelessly promoting and cultivating support for African American art. As part of this project Locke regularly served in an advisory capacity for Executive Director Mary Brady and the Harmon Foundation. During this phase of his career, Locke pressed black artists to emulate the arts and cultures of Africa in order to forge a characteristic African American culture; for example, in the 1931 exhibition catalogue for the annual Harmon prize exhibition, he urged artists "to recapture this [African] heritage of creative originality, and to carry it to distinctive new achievement in a vital, new and racially expressive art." The foundation's endorsement of Hayden's *Fétiche et Fleurs*, which features African sculpture and fabric, exemplifies how Locke's thinking dominated the reception of African American art at this time, as does the outline for the documentary *A Study of Negro Artists*, which said, "the Primitives of the African Negro are the racial inheritance in art of the Negro today."<sup>19</sup>

Locke's response to *The Janitor Who Paints* is only indirectly documented. We do know that Locke and Brady played significant roles in the Baltimore Museum of Art's 1939 exhibition *Contemporary Negro Art*, the show in which the first version of this painting appeared. Locke also reproduced the original version of *Janitor* in his exhaustive *The Negro in Art*. He may have had Hayden's work in mind when he composed the preface for the catalogue of the Baltimore exhibition: "The younger generation . . . plunges naively into the portrayal of Negro life and seems to catch its idioms more characteristically and with less sophistication." This emphasis on the untutored authenticity of black artists' work resurfaces in Locke's review of the show in the journal *Opportunity*, in which he specifically describes Hayden's *Janitor* and *Midsummer Night in Harlem* (fig. 8) as "vigorously naïve racial interpretations." Locke's analysis and celebration of the painter's oeuvre as naïve agreed with dominant definitions of African American painters, which, as we have seen, located them on the periphery of the art world.<sup>20</sup>

Despite Locke's evident support for Hayden, I would suggest that the first incarnation of *The Janitor Who Paints* rejects the Harmon Foundation's adherence to Locke's Afrocentric mandates for black painters, although admittedly in a coded manner. For



although Hayden met Locke during his tenure in Paris and incorporated a Fang reliquary into his award-winning *Fétiche et Fleurs*, the painter only rarely turned to African styles or iconography. In fact, in his only known public statement on the matter, Hayden blankly stated that African art had “no meaning to we Americans.”<sup>21</sup> Close examination of the protagonist in the original version of *Janitor* reveals a comparable, pictorial dismissal of Lockean aesthetics. Observe how the subject’s cranium does not precisely follow the contours of conventional racist imagery. In lieu of the usual phrenological depiction of blacks with sloping “lowbrows” to imply limited intelligence (fig. 9), Hayden endows his surrogate with a swollen, bulbous forehead. We



do not have to look far to account for this unusual choice in physiognomy. In effect, Hayden has caricatured his proxy with the same egg-shaped skull as the Fang carving in *Fétiche et Fleurs*; these two bald heads even share the same thin, arched eyebrows and heavy-lidded eyes as well as the full, thick lips more commonly associated with popular stereotypes.

The affinities between the unaltered *Janitor* and *Fétiche et Fleurs* (see figs. 2 and 3), however, extend well beyond mere craniology. The central heads in both works occupy the same zone of their respective canvases and rest at the terminus of a strong vertical line. Hayden has also situated both figures in similar, if not identical, environments stocked with comparable decor: note the matching chair legs and the correspondence between the wall bracket in *Fétiche et Fleurs* and the high table in *Janitor*. And when it came time for him to revise the painting, the artist later (and otherwise inexplicably) removed the leg struts, appended a higher chair back, and draped a bright red curtain over the writing table as if to throw observant viewers off the scent. The painter’s conscious evocation and perverse parody of his celebrated 1933 work cannot be coincidental. In the original *The Janitor Who Paints*, therefore, Hayden blasts the Harmon Foundation not only for denigrating him as a mere janitor and constantly reminding him of his debt to Lincoln but also for presenting him, in effect, as a living African artifact.

This growing dissatisfaction with Locke’s vision for black aesthetics appeared most prominently in the writings of painter and educator James Porter. In a 1937 article in *Art Front*, Porter vituperated against the latest manifesto by this fellow Howard professor:

*Dr. Alain Leroy Locke’s recent pamphlet, Negro Art: Past and Present, is intended to bolster his already wide reputation as a champion of Africanism in Negro art. This little pamphlet . . . is one of the greatest dangers to the Negro artist in recent years. It contains*

8 Palmer Hayden, *Midsummer Night in Harlem*, 1936. Oil, 25 x 30 in. Museum of African American Art, Los Angeles, Gift of Miriam A. Hayden. Photo, National Archives, College Park, Maryland

9 Illustration from Josiah Clark Nott, *Types of Mankind* (J. B. Lippincott, Grambo & Co., 1854), 458

*a narrow racialist point of view. . . . Dr. Locke supports the defeatist philosophy of the "Segregationist." . . . Weakly, he has yielded to the insistence of the white segregationist that there are inescapable internal differences between white and black . . . so particular that they cannot be reduced through rational investigation.*

Porter objected most to Locke's exhortations that black artists emulate African arts. It is thus likely that the painter would have specifically condemned treatments like *Fétiche et Fleurs* in the same way he later castigated black artists like Aaron Douglas for attempting "to imitate in stilted fashion the surface patterns and geometric shapes of African sculpture."<sup>22</sup> In 1943 Porter published a survey of African American artists entitled *Modern Negro Art*, which in many ways sought to counter Locke's book. Here his declamations against Hayden's oeuvre reached their greatest intensity:

*Lately, however, he has tried to paint satirical pictures of Negro life in Harlem, and in these, including the one entitled "The Janitor Who Paints," we see a talent gone far astray. Not only are the forms in these works confused, but the application of the humor is ill-advised if not altogether tasteless. His "Midsummer Night in Harlem" is like one of those ludicrous billboards that once were plastered on public buildings to advertise the black-face minstrels.*<sup>23</sup>

Porter fully grasped the parodic content and aims of Hayden's artwork but ultimately disapproved of his tactics. For Porter, the reproduction of stereotypes about black artistic naïveté, however sarcastic or critical, was "ill-advised"; while "satirical," in Porter's estimation, the original *Janitor* and *Midsummer Night in Harlem* only served to further "advertise" and thereby abet the racist iconography of minstrelsy.

In the Harmon Foundation exhibitions, Porter and Hayden alike would have come to recognize how white connoisseurs and review committees privileged certain African American artistic practices over others. Thus it seems arguable that Porter's underlying objections arose more from Hayden's and Locke's affiliation with networks of white patronage than from anything inherent in Hayden's paintings; recall how he asserted that Locke "has yielded to the insistence of the white segregationist."<sup>24</sup> In this, ironically, Hayden would have agreed with Porter. But as an artist more securely established at Howard University, Porter could more openly and effectively condemn white patrons' apparent monopoly over the African American art market.<sup>25</sup> Only with support from other sources outside organizations like the Harmon Foundation could black intellectuals and artists fully express their objections to institutional biases against the acceptance of African Americans as artists without qualification. A painter like Palmer Hayden had to voice these concerns in more subtle ways.

If, as I have argued here, the first version of *The Janitor Who Paints* represented a satire of the foundation's philanthropic efforts, what was the significance of Hayden's subsequent revision—his decision to prune the barbed thorns of parody from the painting? This is more difficult to ascertain for a number of reasons. Not long after the 1939 Baltimore exhibition and Locke's 1940 book, the controversial canvas went into hibernation for decades, and no new reproductions appeared in print that might help us pinpoint the precise date of the artist's revision. During its absence from the public eye, *Janitor* ceased to generate any additional critical commentary that might clarify the painter's motives or the reactions of its various publics.

Did the artist eventually decide that the painting was too satirical, insufficiently satirical, or simply too ineffective as satire? The Harmon Foundation had inexplicably acquired the original canvas sometime between the Baltimore show of 1939 and the



publication of Locke's volume in 1940.<sup>26</sup> Did Hayden revise the work because he wished to smooth things over with his benefactors, because the foundation requested that he repaint his subjects, or because the continued support of white philanthropists suggested the futility of his irony? Perhaps arguments from fellow painters like James

Porter ultimately convinced Hayden that efforts to out-stereotype the stereotyper were doomed to fail. I personally favor this last theory, for which there is admittedly no more or less evidence, because it further redefines Hayden's reputation: not as an amateur who unconsciously recirculated racist imagery but as a savvy professional aware of and engaged in ongoing debates about the efficacy and impact of various styles, modes, and subject matter on African American art.

Over the past decade, similar disagreements about whether African American artists should incorporate racist imagery into their work have again divided the art world. Among others, Michael Harris in his book *Colored Pictures* roundly condemns artists like Robert Colescott (fig. 10), Kara Walker, and Michael Ray Charles for disseminating noxious stereotypes in the effort to undermine them, saying: "Recycling, inverting, and deconstructing racist images have some effect in dismantling that imagery, but those strategies visually root us in our oppression. . . . [T]hese strategies do little to transform the consciousness (or double consciousness) of those purportedly being defended." Henry Louis Gates Jr., by contrast, is one of many black intellectuals who have defended artists' use of "seminal stereotypical images." In drawing on such "debased, racist images," he has said:



- 10 Robert Colescott, *I Gets a Thrill Too When I Sees De Koo*, 1978. Acrylic, 84 x 66 in. Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University, Waltham, Massachusetts, Gift of Senator and Mrs. William Bradley

*[T]hese artists are seeking to liberate both the tradition of the representation of the black in popular and high art forms and to liberate our people from residual, debilitating effects that the proliferation of those images undoubtedly has had upon the collective unconscious of the African American people, and indeed upon our artists themselves and their modes of representation.*<sup>27</sup>

Palmer Hayden's career does not help us reconcile these profound differences of opinion, but the case of *The Janitor Who Paints* does effectively demonstrate that this debate is not the product of postmodernity but boasts a much longer lineage.

## Notes

I owe a debt of thanks to Cécile Whiting, Jacqueline Francis, Bridget Cooks, Helen Langa, and the anonymous reviewers for *American Art* for their invaluable commentary and research advice.

- 1 Mary Schmidt Campbell, introduction to Campbell et al., *Harlem Renaissance: Art of Black America* (New York: Studio Museum in Harlem; Harry N. Abrams, 1987), 33. More recent criticism has been less censorious but nonetheless skeptical about Hayden's motives and legacy. Although Theresa A. Leininger-Miller asks the question, "was Hayden mocking the white administration and audience of the Harmon Foundation or was he just having fun?" she ultimately concludes that "perhaps he had a bit of the Stockholm syndrome, in which the captive identifies with the captor and perpetuates oppression when s/he in turn gains power." See Leininger-Miller, *New Negro Artists in Paris: African American Painters and Sculptors in the City of Light, 1922–1934* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers Univ. Press, 2001), 97, 101–2. Likewise, although Richard Powell allows that Hayden's works from this period "could be interpreted as a satirical response," he too has determined that "Hayden's use in *Midsummer Night in Harlem* of the stereotypes of wide-eyed and grinning blacks gave his work a troubling air, especially in its visual corroboration of common racist sentiments"; see Powell, *Black Art: A Cultural History*, 2nd ed. (London: Thames & Hudson, 2002), 68–70. By contrast, Sharon Patton's textbook on African American art accepts these paintings as "satirical"; Patton, *African-American Art* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1998), 138.
- 2 Hayden, quoted in Romare Bearden and Harry Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists: From 1792 to the Present* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993), 159.
- 3 Jeffrey Stewart, "Black Modernism and White Patronage," *International Review of African American Art* 11, no. 3 (1994): 43.
- 4 On Hayden's biography, training, and early exhibitions, see Bearden and Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists*, 157–67; Leininger-Miller, *New Negro Artists in Paris*, 70–71; Allan Gordon, *Echoes of Our Past: The Narrative Artistry of Palmer C. Hayden* (Los Angeles: Museum of African American Art, 1988), 11–12; and Regenia Perry, *Free within Ourselves: African-American Artists in the Collection of the National Museum of American Art* (Washington, D.C.: National Museum of American Art, 1992), 87–89.
- 5 On Dike's largesse, see Palmer Hayden to William E. Harmon, February 19, 1927, Harmon Foundation Papers, Library of Congress (hereafter Harmon Foundation Papers), box 42, Palmer Hayden folder. See also Eric Hanks, "Journey from the Crossroads: Palmer Hayden's Right Turn," *International Review of African American Art* 16, no. 1 (1999): 34; Gordon, *Echoes of Our Past*, 13; and Leininger-Miller, *New Negro Artists in Paris*, 70. The painting was dated to 1937 in the exhibition catalogue *Contemporary Negro Art* (Baltimore: Baltimore Museum of Art, 1939); it was dated 1936 in the later exhibition catalogue *The Downtown Gallery, American Negro Art, 19th and 20th Centuries, December 9 to January 3, 1942* (New York: Downtown Gallery, 1942). Alain Locke's publication of the original *Janitor* (with a date of 1937) in his book *The Negro in Art* (Washington, D.C.: Associates in Negro Folk Education, 1940), 43, is the terminus a quo for the dating of Hayden's alteration.
- 6 "Negro Artist Wins Prize for Paintings," *New York Times*, December 8, 1926, 11. See also William Trapp, "Painting by Negro Window Cleaner Takes First Prize at Art Exhibition," *New York Evening World*, December 13, 1926, 4. Later articles that adhere to the same narrative include "Negro, 33, Quits Scrub Bucket to Paint Abroad," *New York Tribune*, March 13, 1927; "57 Negro Artists Presented in Fifth Harmon Foundation Exhibit," *Art Digest* 7, no. 11 (March 1933): 18; and "Black Prizes," *Time*, March 6, 1933, 42.
- 7 Harmon Foundation press release, December 7, 1926, Harmon Foundation Papers, box 3, Publicity—Negro Awards folder.
- 8 George Haynes to Evelyn Brown, February 28, 1927, Harmon Foundation Papers, box 42, Palmer Hayden folder; Evelyn Brown, "Negro Achievement Revealed by Harmon Awards," *Opportunity* 5, no. 1 (January 1927): 20; Harmon Foundation press release, March 12, 1927, Harmon Foundation Papers, box 24, Press Releases, Negro Awards, 1927 folder. This press release is also discussed in Leininger-Miller, *New Negro Artists in Paris*, 73. On Haynes, see Gary Reynolds, Beryl Wright, and David Driskell, *Against the Odds: African-American Artists and the Harmon Foundation* (Newark, N.J.: Newark Museum, 1989), 50–56.
- 9 On Mary Beattie Brady, see Bearden and Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists*, 250–59; on the film, see *ibid.*, 164. *Materials on Negro Achievement in Art*, undated pamphlet, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., reel 45, frames 70–73.
- 10 Harmon Foundation, *Negro Artists: An Illustrated Review of Their Achievements* (New York: Harmon Foundation, 1935), 5, quoted in Reynolds, Wright, and Driskell, *Against the Odds*, 84.
- 11 Harmon Foundation, *A Study of Negro Artists*, 16 mm film, 40 mins., ca. 1937. Motion Picture, Sound, and Video Records, National Archives, College Park, Md.
- 12 See "Negro Artists at Work: Suggested Titles," typescript, and "Negro Artists at Work: Outline of Film Content," typescript, both found in production files for *A Study of Negro Artists*, Motion Picture, Sound, and Video Records, National Archives, Background Material folder; see also "A Study of Negro Artists," typescript, in Suggestions for Use folder, 1. Two undated reels of outtakes exist at the National Archives: *Art and Sculpture; Negro Education and Art in the U.S.*, and the identically titled *A Study of Negro Artists*.
- 13 Harmon Foundation, *Negro Artists*, 49; and Audrey McMahon, *The Art of the Negro*, exhibition flyer, Harmon Foundation Papers, box 66, folder CAA exhibition, 1934.
- 14 Richard J. Powell, *Homecoming: The Art and Life of William H. Johnson* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 138, also quoted in Cornel West, "Horace Pippin's Challenge to Art Criticism," in West, *Keeping Faith: Philosophy and Race in America* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 57. Mary Ann Calo has also discussed this "presumption of

- amateurism" in African American art; see her seminal essay, "African American Art and Critical Discourse between World Wars," *American Quarterly* 51, no. 3 (September 1999): 588–91, quote on 588; see also Kinshasha Holman Conwill, "In Search of an 'Authentic' Vision: Decoding the Appeal of the Self-Taught African-American Artist," *American Art* 5, no. 4 (Autumn 1991): 6. On Edmondson, see Eugene Metcalf, "Black Art, Folk Art, and Social Control," *Winterthur Portfolio* 18, no. 4 (Winter 1983): 284–87. On Pippin, see Holger Cahill et al., *Masters of Popular Painting: Modern Primitives of Europe and America* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1938), 125; and West, "Horace Pippin's Challenge," 55–66.
- 15 *New York Evening World*, December 13, 1926, 4.
  - 16 On Parks, see Philip Brookman, ed., *Half Past Autumn: A Retrospective; Gordon Parks* (Boston: Bulfinch Press, in association with Corcoran Gallery of Art, 1997), 30–32, 347–50; and Nicholas Natanson, *The Black Image in the New Deal: The Politics of FSA Photography* (Knoxville: Univ. of Tennessee Press, 1992), 61–62, 177–86. For the quote, see Vernon Winslow, "Negro Art and the Depression," *Opportunity* 17 (February 1941): 41.
  - 17 Harmon Foundation press release, December 21, 1925, Harmon Foundation Papers, box 21, Press Releases, Negro Awards, 1926 folder; and George Edmund Haynes, "The Harmon Awards in 1926," *Crisis* 33 (January 1927): 156, quoted in Reynolds, Wright, and Driskell, *Against the Odds*, 13. On Lincoln's centrality to the iconography of emancipation, see Kirk Savage, *Standing Soldiers, Kneeling Slaves: Race, War, and Monument in Nineteenth-Century America* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1997), 65–128; and Scott Sandage, "A Marble House Divided: The Lincoln Memorial, the Civil Rights Movement, and the Politics of Memory, 1939–1963," *Journal of American History* 80, no. 1 (June 1993): 135–67.
  - 18 Romare Bearden, "The Negro Artist and Modern Art," *Opportunity* 12, no. 12 (December 1934): 372; and Bearden, "The Negro Artist's Dilemma," *Critique: A Review of Contemporary Art* 1, no. 2 (November 1946): 19. Elsewhere in his volume Bearden calls this documentary *How to Paint a Picture*, but no shorts with this title survive in the extensive holdings of Harmon Foundation motion pictures at the National Archives. See Bearden and Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists*, 164. On Bearden's artistic philosophies, see also Jacqueline Francis, "Reading Bearden," in *The Art of Romare Bearden* (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 2003), esp. 179–81.
  - 19 Alain Locke, "The African Legacy and the Negro Artist," in Harmon Foundation, *Exhibition of the Work of Negro Artists* (New York: Harmon Foundation, 1931), 12; also quoted in Bearden and Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists*, 245. A later catalogue reiterated these sentiments: "the Negro artist is rapidly becoming aware that from his African ancestry he has derived deeply rooted capacities and instincts that are capable of being translated into vital art forms." Harmon Foundation, *Negro Artists*, 5. "Negro Artists at Work: Outline of Film Content."
  - 20 Baltimore Museum, *Contemporary Negro Art*, n.p.; and Alain Locke, "Advance on the Art Front," *Opportunity* 17 (May 1939): 136. See also Bearden and Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists*, 257–59.
  - 21 Quoted in Bearden and Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists*, 162.
  - 22 James A. Porter, "The Negro Artist and Racial Bias," *Art Front* 3 (June–July 1937): 8; and Porter, *Modern Negro Art* (1943; New York: Arno Press, 1969), 104. On Porter and Locke, see Calo, "African American Art and Critical Discourse," 603–4; Keith Morrison, *Art in Washington and Its Afro-American Presence: 1940–1970* (Washington, D.C.: Washington Project for the Arts, 1985), 21–24, 32–39; and Cécile Whiting, "More Than Meets the Eye: Archibald Motley and Debates on Race in Art," *Prospects* 26 (2001): 465–67.
  - 23 Porter, *Modern Negro Art*, 110.
  - 24 I do not mean to imply that Locke was blindly complicit with the prevailing paternalism of white cultural philanthropy in the same way other scholars have denounced Hayden. By the occasion of the Baltimore exhibition and the publication of *The Negro in Art*, Locke had already begun to retreat from his wholehearted endorsement of "racial art" that harkened back to Africa. In his 1940 volume he even set aside space to respond to charges that he had promoted a segregationist art: "Fortunately this movement did not lead the Negro artist, as had sometimes been feared, into a backwater inlet of racist art, but, on the contrary, led out to the mainstream of contemporary American art"; Locke, *The Negro in Art*, 9. By the late thirties, Locke had switched to American Scene rhetoric, as evidenced in his preface for the Baltimore exhibition. See Calo, "African American Art and Critical Discourse," 607.
  - 25 The market for black art, unlike black literature, depended more heavily on white patronage, institutions, and intermediaries. See Mary Ann Calo, "'Seeing' the Harlem Renaissance: Observations on the Position of Visual Art in Harlem Renaissance Studies," *Prospects* 27 (2002): 434. The author, in turn, relies on Michele Wallace, "Modernism, Postmodernism and the Problem of the Visual in Afro-American Culture," in *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, ed. Russell Ferguson (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1990), 41.
  - 26 Locke's text lists the Harmon Foundation as the owner of the painting, while the Baltimore exhibition catalogue makes no such attribution.
  - 27 Michael D. Harris, *Colored Pictures: Race and Visual Representation* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2003), 222. Gates, quoted in Juliet Bowles, "Extreme Times Call for Extreme Heroes," *International Review of African American Art* 14, no. 3 (1997): 5; and in Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw, *Seeing the Unspeakable: The Art of Kara Walker* (Durham, N.C.: Duke Univ. Press, 2004), 35–36. Shaw undertakes a sustained and valuable examination of recent controversies that have erupted around the oeuvre of Walker and Colescott; see esp. 31–36, 103–23.