When the National Museum of African American History and Culture opened in 2016, three new abstract works of public art defined the large entry space: Chakaia Booker’s *The Liquidity of Legacy* (2016), Sam Gilliam’s *Yet Do I Marvel (Countee Cullen)* (2016), and *Swing Low* (2016) by Richard Hunt. The public art resonated with the museum’s mission of examining black culture and history in a global and local perspective. That these works were part of a long practice of black public art in the United States was an aspect that received little notice.

This chapter is a step toward outlining the category of black public art. In major overviews of public art in the United States, black people appear as artists, as members of communities, and as patrons, but black public art is not a category for analysis. Art historians focusing on black art and artists note that many works, particularly murals, were created for public audiences, yet do not categorize this work as public art. This essay argues that black public art is a useful category that complicates notions of public art and black visual culture.

The essay focuses on work by artists based in the United States who identified as having African ancestry, regardless of their nationality. I will usually describe these artists as black, while recognizing that they may have called themselves—or have been perceived as—colored, Negro, Afro-American, or African American. The audience for and themes of black public art are varied, but a significant proportion of this art speaks to, and originates from, the historical and lived experiences of black people.

Many analyses of public art assume a public sphere to which all individuals have equal access. When considering black public art—and perhaps all public art—the reality of people’s access to the public sphere must be taken into account. Slavery, racial terror, segregation, discrimination on the basis of race, gender, nationality, and sexuality, and other functions of white supremacy have not only limited black people’s ability to exist in the public sphere on an equal basis but have been fundamental aspects of public life in the United States more generally.

In the nineteenth century, black people developed institutions to serve their needs, including churches, businesses, schools, clubs, historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs), civic organizations, and media. These institutions comprised a black public sphere. Many of these organizations also advocated for civil rights and were deeply concerned with the public representations of black life, not only to nonblack people but also to themselves. Because of this concern with visual culture, institutions of black public life have often sponsored black public art.
My analysis began with public art identified through the Save Outdoor Sculpture! Database and reviewing scholarship on black art. Although public art includes work on public view on a temporary basis as well as art that is considered permanent, these research methods have skewed my analysis toward well-documented, long-term installations by artists with national reputations. This chapter is arranged chronologically and begins by considering antecedents for black public art in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Antecedents

Until the New Deal programs of the 1930s, most black artists creating public art sponsored their own work or received commissions arising from the black public sphere. Further, until the 1960s, few cities or majority organizations commissioned black artists to create public sculpture, the then dominant form of public art. Because the historiography of public art tends to use the 1960s as a starting point and does not question the absence of black artists from public sculpture commissions, the scholarship furthers the implicit assumption that black people were not making public art. This section suggests that the roots of black public art are in the nineteenth century.

James Presley Ball (1825–1904) is best known for his daguerreotypes and other photography. In the 1850s, he designed a panorama—a painted mural six hundred yards long and four yards tall—that connected the history of black people to antislavery activism. Panoramas were intended to instruct and entertain and immerse visitors in a “linear narrative.” The pamphlet that Ball produced to accompany the panorama, the only surviving artifact of the *Mammoth Pictorial Tour* (1855), indicates that Ball used his panorama to attack the arguments of apologists for slavery and convince viewers that black people struggled for their freedom. Ball exhibited the panorama in Cincinnati and Boston, cities in which black people and radical whites fought against slavery and assisted fugitives. Several of the themes Ball explored in his panorama, particularly black history in the United States and Africa, would resonate in later works of black public art.

The sculptures created for expositions and fairs are another antecedent of black public art. Several expositions featured booths or buildings dedicated to demonstrating the progress that black people had made since the end of slavery, and although temporary, these structures could be considered manifestations of the black public sphere. Mabel O. Wilson argues that in these “Negro Buildings,” black Americans created exhibitions that produced “counternarratives” to the dominant culture’s contemptuous representations of their lives and history. The Negro Building at the 1895 Atlanta Cotton States and International Exposition featured *The Negro with Chains Broken* (ca. 1895), a plaster work created by “Mr. W. C. Hill, a colored sculptor” of Washington, D.C. An observer wrote that this “cast of a Negro of heroic size … represents powerfully the hampered condition of the Negro.” Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller (1877–1968) accepted W. E. B. Du Bois’ invitation to create a sculpture for an exposition commemorating the anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation. Renée Ater describes Fuller’s *Emancipation* (1913) as “a monument made specifically for the African American community.”

In the late 1930s, sculptor Augusta Savage (1892–1962) (Figure 25.1) was commissioned to create a sculpture for the World’s Fair in New York City. *The Harp: Lift Ev’ry Voice and Sing*...
(1939) referenced the “Negro National Anthem,” by the brothers John Rosamond Johnson and James Weldon Johnson. The work featured twelve African American figures arranged like the strings in a harp. The sixteen-foot-tall plaster cast was prominently displayed in the fair’s art center, not in a Negro Building, and black people welcomed its depiction of racial dignity and joy. At the fair’s end, Savage did not have the resources to store The Harp, let alone cast it in bronze, and the work was destroyed.¹¹

Murals are likely the most widespread examples of black public art. Compared to other forms, murals are relatively inexpensive to complete and can be placed in a wide variety of locations. Many murals in the black public sphere emphasize history, narrative, and a strong, positive image of black people, attributes murals share with Ball’s panorama. Among the earliest murals in public spaces is Black Christ and Mary (1904) by Proctor Chisolm, a self-taught artist who painted the mural for his church in Chicago.¹² It is unlikely that scholars will ever account for all the black artists that worked on murals from the 1800s through the present, given that many projects were small and only known to people in the immediate region, involved artists whose reputations were in their communities, and that some black artists worked on projects that had little connection to African American life or culture. Further, murals are vulnerable to destruction and many have not been systematically documented.

William Edouard Scott (1884–1964) became well known for his murals (Figure 25.2) that, as Kymberly Pinder notes, melded his academic painting style “with an unconventional racial fluidity.”¹³ Scott received his first mural commission in the early 1900s, and over the course of his career would complete over seventy murals for schools, churches, and businesses. He compared
to his murals to a panorama, and in their multiple scenes he depicted black people in scenarios ranging from nursery rhymes to biblical scenes.\textsuperscript{14}

These antecedents are intended to stimulate reflection and are not in any way a comprehensive list. Because these antecedents are known through references and commentary, little is known about how they were received or what they looked like. Indeed, precariousness may be a feature of early black public art. These works reveal a longstanding interest among some artists in engaging with the narrative history of black people and could contribute to the growing scholarship on black visual culture of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.\textsuperscript{15}

Further, although murals would long dominate black public art, there is early evidence that artists were experimenting with sculpture in public places.

**1920s–1930s: The New Negro and New Deal art programs**

In the 1920s, debates about Negro Art provided an intellectual framework for the emerging tradition of black public art. W. E. B. Du Bois argued that literature, music, and the visual arts were tools that allowed viewers to both envision a more hopeful history and fight white supremacy. To that end, the NAACP leadership, James Weldon Johnson and Du Bois, commissioned Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller to create a centerpiece for the “Americans of Negro Lineage” booth for
a 1921 exposition in New York. Fuller described *Ethiopia* (ca. 1921), a work with an Egyptian motif, as representing the Negro “gradually unwinding the bandage of its mummied past and looking out on life again … with at least a graceful gesture.”

Philosopher Alain Locke argued that black artists should look to their history in the United States and Africa for inspiration and also for lessons of “discipline, of style, of technical control pushed to the limits of technical mastery.” Unlike many of his Harlem Renaissance contemporaries, Locke focused on visual culture and asserted that black art had a distinct genealogy and tradition, and had not emerged only as a response to white bigotry. Artists including Charles White (1918–1979) and Sargent “Claude” Johnson (1887–1967) acknowledged Locke’s influence on their work. Locke supported black art and artists by writing numerous popular articles, curating exhibitions, and deploying behind-the-scenes advocacy.

Black artists had long studied in Europe, but from the 1920s and 1930s, they also looked to the Americas for inspiration, particularly Haiti. Further, the long exchange between black Americans and Mexican artists would be particularly resonant in murals. Mexican artists’ direct engagement with politics and valorization of peasants and indigenous people deeply influenced generations of black artists, many of whom studied with Mexican artists both in the United States and Mexico. Charles White, for example, engaged with both Locke and Mexican muralists when he executed the mural *The Contribution of the Negro to Democracy in America* (1943) for the Hampton Institute.

Aaron Douglas (1899–1979) developed a distinctive modernist style that seemed, to many, to embody both the Harlem Renaissance and black people’s connections to Africa. Douglas’ first murals were for hotels and clubs, but he gained prominence for his murals at Fisk University’s new library (1930) and *Spirits Rising (Harriet Tubman)* (1931) for Bennett College. With support from the Works Progress Administration (WPA), he painted *Aspects of Negro Life* (1934) for the Harlem branch of the New York Public Library (now the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture).

From the 1930s, several HBCUs began developing art programs that offered both studio and art history classes. As instructors involved students in public art projects, students learned the traditions of black public art with their formal instruction. At Hampton Institute (now University), for example, Viktor Lowenfeld encouraged his students, including John Biggers (1924–2001) and Samella Lewis (b. 1924), to embrace social commentary in their murals. In 1868, Hampton established the first museum at an HBCU; by the mid-twentieth century several other colleges and universities also had museums, providing art students with the opportunity to closely study art. These museums were particularly important in the South, where black patrons contended with Jim Crow restrictions when they attempted to visit “white” museums.

With the beginning of New Deal programs, black public art received an infusion of funds and increased visibility. Racial, ethnic, and gender discrimination shaped how communities and artists received New Deal projects. Many black artists worked on New Deal projects not as artists, but as instructors, or in areas completely unrelated to the arts. Mary Ann Calo notes that these factors have contributed to the underrepresentation of black people in the historiography of New Deal art programs. The constraints affecting black artists were significant, but the projects provided black artists with unprecedented opportunities to meet, collaborate, experiment, and form lifelong associations.

Many black artists worked on projects in the black public sphere. For example, Charles Alston supervised the Harlem Hospital mural project, the first WPA project awarded to black artists. William J. Thompkins, the Recorder of Deeds of Washington, DC, an appointed position traditionally held by black politicians, leveraged New Deal resources to secure public art
projects, including a mural of Frederick Douglass by William Edouard Scott, and a relief portrait of Franklin Delano Roosevelt by Selma Burke (1900–1995). HBCU’s became sites of public art production. Talladega College commissioned Hale Woodruff to create six murals for its new library: one cycle featured the Amistad rebellion by captured Africans, and the second featured the founding of the college and the construction of the library. At LeMoyne College (now LeMoyne-Owen College) in Memphis, Vertis Hayes taught art, supervised several murals executed by his students, and directed the federally funded Community Art Center designated for the city’s black residents.

Post–World War II

From the United States’ entry into World War II through the 1950s, the black public sphere continued to support public art. Charles Alston and Hale Woodruff created two murals for the Los Angeles headquarters of the Golden State Municipal Life Insurance Company depicting the history of black people in California. Woodruff also painted the Art of the Negro mural cycle for Atlanta University, which placed African art at the center of art history. However, Cold War politics and the United States’ suspicion of radicalism dampened black artists’ opportunities to travel and receive commissions.

Several major developments in the 1960s and 1970s affected the trajectory of black public art: the civil rights movement and its efforts to expand citizenship and access to public space; the emergence of community-based arts inspired in large part by the Black Arts Movement, and the growth of a public art infrastructure. The Wall of Respect (1967) in Chicago, produced by artists associated with the Visual Arts Workshop of the Organization of Black American Culture (OBAC) had an outsized influence on black public art. The artists of OBAC were involved in Chicago’s antiracism communities, as well as the Black Arts Movement. The audience for the Wall of Respect was bound by access to the street on which the mural’s building was located, in a predominately black space. The Wall of Respect was connected to the earlier tradition of black public art through its historical subject matter as well as the participation of OBAC artist William Walker (1927–2011), who painted his first murals in the 1940s under the guidance of Samella Lewis.

By 1971, the Wall of Respect had been destroyed, but its influence continued in the community mural movement. Community groups and activists often leveraged federal or municipal funds to create remarkable creative projects. The Smokehouse Collective (1968–1970) in New York City, for example, departed from narrative murals and experimented with geometric forms and sculpture. The trajectory of the community mural movement indicate the changing meanings of black public art. Many influential mural projects focused on collaboration and community, loosely defined by geography, age, ethnicity, race, or other factors. OBAC transformed itself into the Chicago Public Art Group, a collaborative with a sophisticated, community-based process grounded in “social and aesthetic possibilities of collaborative public art.”

The public art infrastructure has its roots in federal support for the arts and humanities in the 1960s, including the National Endowment for the Arts, which established the precedent of using federal funds for public art. States, cities, nonprofit organizations, and private individuals followed suit, contributing to what Harriet Senie calls a revitalization of public sculpture. The growing infrastructure meant, on a practical level, that more black artists were able to create more public art, in a greater variety of styles, and in more communities. Further, public art commissions went to local artists with regional reputations as well as those who were nationally known. Public art scholars and critics have noted these trends in public art, but few have engaged with, or acknowledged, the historical practice of black public art. Therefore, the specific
ways in which the practice of public art in the late twentieth century intersects with black public art remains understudied.

Black artists have been involved in the various trends of public art including art in architecture, creating art with communities, and integrating the history of place in public art. Some examples illustrate the diversity of art made by black artists. Rick Lowe (b. 1961) initiated Project Row Houses in 1993, a complex endeavor that involves public art, affordable housing, and artistic collaboration with the people who live in Houston’s Third Ward, a predominately black neighborhood. Lowe credits public artist John Biggers with emphasizing how the shotgun houses and yards of the neighborhood’s built environment reveal rich cultural connections with West Africa. 41 David Hammons (b. 1943) created House of the Future (1991) as part of the Places with a Past exhibition that Mary Jane Jacob curated in Charleston, South Carolina as part of the city’s Spoleto Festival. Hammons located his work on municipal property in an historical black neighborhood, where, with local contractor Albert Alston, he constructed a narrow house and a tiny park with a mural featuring local children. Hammons’ African American Flag (1990), in which the Black Nationalist colors—green, red, and black—replace the red, white, and blue of the U.S. flag, flies above the park. Perhaps because of Alston’s care, House of the Future has endured decades after the exhibition closed. 42 As part U.S. State Department program, Mickalene Thomas (b. 1971) co-created Dakar (2016) a mosaic mural for a new U.S. embassy in Senegal with Ibrahima Niang “Piniang” (b. 1976). And in July 2016, the flag by Dread Scott (b. 1965) A Man Was Lynched by Police Yesterday (2015), which referenced the flag the NAACP displayed from its headquarters in the twentieth century, became a work of public art when it was flown outside a gallery in New York after Philando Castile and Alton Sterling, in separate incidents, died after being shot by police earlier that month. 43

Self-sponsored black public art can be assumed to have a long history, though many works have likely been lost. The murals that Clementine Hunter (ca. 1886–1988) created in the 1950s near her rural Louisiana home may be unusual in that they have survived, undergone conservation, and are on public display. 44 In 1986, Tyree Guyton (b. 1955) initiated the Heidelberg Project in his Detroit neighborhood by reshaping vacant houses, lots, and found objects, often with the assistance from neighbors.

Many institutions of the historical black public sphere have been substantially altered due to civil rights activism, changing housing patterns, disinvestment from urban areas, and other factors. However, black churches and HBCUs continue to commission public art, and with more available funds, the commissions include large outdoor sculpture. Winston-Salem State University in North Carolina, for example, has an ambitious program of campus public art including murals by John Biggers, and abstract outdoor sculpture Tyrone Mitchell (b. 1944), Melvin Edwards (b. 1937), and Beverly Buchanan (1940–2015). 45

The scholarship of black public art is currently intermittent and isolated from scholarship of both public art and the black public sphere. There are many areas that would benefit from investigation, for example: close studies of the reception of black public art; the physical location of black public art and how space expresses alternative notions of the public sphere; and the role of institutions of the black public sphere in promoting visual culture, including public art. The period from the 1960s onward, in which ideas of blackness, the public sphere, and public art transformed, is particularly in need of scholarship that brings public art in dialogue with literary studies, political science, and other fields. An example of the rich possibilities of such investigations is La Tanya Autry’s essay, which considers temporary murals within the framework of Fred Moten and Stefano Harney’s concept of fugitivity. 46 Further, the changing notions idea of the “blackness” of black public art should be investigated. How do the black public and black public artists interpret this work: Is black public art only art
created by black people that is in the public? Or do shared sensibilities of some sort define black public art?

In the 1990s, the National Center of Afro-American Artists and the Museum of Afro-American History underwrote the cost of casting Meta Warrick Fuller’s 1913 statue *Emancipation*. In 1999, *Emancipation* was placed in a Boston park along with *Step on Board* (1999), a monument by Fern Cunningham commemorating Harriet Tubman's liberation of enslaved people. The effort of placing Fuller’s work in public, and in dialogue with Cunningham’s work, is a poignant acknowledgment of the antecedents of black public art and its ongoing relevance to today’s black public art.

**Notes**

Black Public Art in the United States

13 Pinder, Painting the Gospel, 25.
28 Charles Alston, Sargent Johnson, and Archibald J. Motley Jr. were the only black supervisors of WPA art projects. Lott, “Sargent Johnson and His Milieu”; Coleman, “Keeping Hope Alive,” 17.
34 Biggers and Simms, Black Art in Houston, 65.

38 Prigoff and Dunitz, Walls of Heritage, Walls of Pride, 127.


47 Ater, Remaking Race and History, 134–137.

Bibliography


