

“Where there is no vision, the people perish.”
- Proverbs 29:18

The Religious Imagination: **Exploring the Black Catholic Artistic Vision**

Readings include:

- excerpt from *Beholding Christ and Christianity in African American Art*, Edited by James Romaine and Phoebe Wolfskill, 2018
- “*Choosing Catholicism and celebrating Black Catholic History Month*,” Cecilia Moore, 2018
- *A Balm in Gilead*, African American Spiritual
- A selection of visual art from: Archibald J. Motley Jr., Mary Edmonia Lewis, James Richmond Barthé, James VanDerZee, Clementine Hunter
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excerpt from the Introduction, “Hidden in Plain Sight: Christ and Christianity in African American Art,” from *Beholding Christ and Christianity in African American Art*, Edited by James Romaine and Phoebe Wolfskill, 2018

In a 1933 work *Self Portrait (Myself at Work)*, Archibald J. Motley Jr. surrounds himself with attributes that portray his personal and artistic identity (figure I.1). The nearly completed painting of a lush nude, a classical statuette in the foreground, and a plaster mask that Motley would have copied during his study at the Art Institute of Chicago, all reference the artist’s abilities and academic training. The directness with which Motley addresses the viewer recalls his earlier self-portrait, circa 1920; however, the 1933 work incorporates objects that speak more specifically to his artistic mastery, communicating the confidence that followed a decade of notoriety as a central artist of the Harlem, or “New Negro,” Renaissance. Motley notably includes a crucifix behind him on his studio wall. In tandem with the secular studio props, the crucifix conveys the complexity of Motley’s identity as an artist, an African American, and a Catholic. Motley’s work visualizes a gap in our conceptualization of African American art; like the crucifix in his *Self Portrait*, the presence of Christianity in the work of many African American artists is hidden in plain sight.

In the history of African American art, commentators often overlook the multiple factors that contribute to an artist’s sense of self, and particularly one’s relationship to religious faith, due in part to a heightened focus on racial identity. As the artists examined in this anthology prove, however, Christianity and the visualization of Christian themes are a central component of this history. By exploring the unique relationship between specific artists and their engagement with Christian subjects and references, *Beholding Christ and Christianity in African American Art* develops a vital conversation regarding the place of Christianity in American art and the complexity of African American visual expression, which is inevitably informed not solely by racial identity but by the many influences that shape selfhood and artistic communication.

Motley’s conspicuous reference to his Catholic faith in his *Self Portrait* brings a number of questions into focus. What does it mean for an African American artist to identify and be involved with the Catholic Church in Chicago in the early twentieth century? How does exhibiting his Catholic affiliation underscore his relationship to a larger community bound by religious faith, whether white, black, middle class, working class, or other categories? In what ways does Motley’s religious affiliation influence his approach to art and artistic vision? Motley’s subtle yet significant inclusion of a crucifix invites a wealth of queries that inspires viewers to probe deeply into the artist’s identity and conception of self. At the same time, it encourages consideration of the ways in which Motley’s religious alliance places him in relation to broader social and artistic communities and cultures.

In her study of race and American modernism, art historian Jacqueline Francis notes the limited perceptions of religious work by Harlem Renaissance artist Malvin Gray Johnson, remarking on the commonplace understanding of African Americans as “America’s most pious Christians.” Exploring this long-standing assumption of the relationship between blackness and Christian devotion reveals its obvious narrowness, yet this conception has frequently prevented a closer engagement with the association between black identity, faith, and artistic expression. Furthermore, as Francis questions, in relating racial identity and religion, is a reference to Christian subject matter solely a reflection of piety? *Beholding* seeks to broaden and complicate the relationships between African American artists and Christian subject matter by exploring how the artist’s engagement with religious subjects, symbols, or themes can be an expression of an array of concerns related to racial, political, and socioeconomic identity as well as social and artistic community, audience and art market, and formalist experimentation.

Beholding, therefore, advances the art historical discourse by integrating religion and race into the matrix of factors that influence art production, use, and interpretation. Many of the most celebrated African American artists have created works of art that visually manifest overt Christian motifs and themes. In much of the scholarly discussion of these works, Christian subjects have been primarily examined through methodologies that foreground issues of race. In spring 2003, *American Art* published a dialogue among notable contemporary scholars of the field about the state of African American art history. In his contribution, James Smalls calls for multiple theoretical models and methods for addressing African American art in order to recognize its art historical significance and broaden and complicate the established but often delimited field. Smalls writes that one must “transform it [African American art history] from a moribund field of special interest and fixed concepts into a vital terrain of lively and contested ideas.” In his own work, Smalls enriches the discipline by considering the ways in which issues of gender and sexuality, alongside race, inform an artist’s visual strategies. *Beholding* adds religion to this discussion as a strategy of further expanding the field. How does one understand these works differently when one measures them with methods that emphasize their formal, iconographic, and thematic participation in the history of Christianity and the visual arts in a manner that considers race, but never assumes racial identity as a sole or even primary factor? A close analysis of these aesthetic techniques and choices is fundamental to this anthology.

Cultural theorist Kobena Mercer writes, “Despite the welcome proliferation of surveys and monographs in recent years, the black art object is rarely a focus of attention in its own right.” Indeed, scholarship on African American art advances only if one evaluates black artistic production as consisting of objects meaningful beyond statements of identity and culture and worthy of rigorous formal evaluation. The artists featured in this anthology, whether academically trained or self-taught, visionary or matter-of-fact in their approach to Christian themes, construct objects that have visual and often tactile power that activates the intellect, emotions, and perception of the viewer. The chapters in *Beholding* thus raise the following question: how does one visualize a Christian theme or symbol in a manner that serves didactic or illustrative purposes while simultaneously underscoring the power of visual art to provoke religious devotion?

Alongside stressing the practical, aesthetic, and interpretive decisions artists make in constructing a particular work, the contributions in this volume consider the broader social and cultural context related to racial, class, and gendered identity as well as geographical region. These contexts are then deepened by considering the artist's intended audiences and the nature of those audiences' expectations and desires. Racial identity and what it signifies are forever elusive. In exploring the complication of racial labels and affiliations, literary scholar J. Martin Favor writes, "Blackness is constantly being invented, policed, transgressed, and contested." To deal in any way with "African American art" is to necessarily engage the paradox of identity: to label an art as "African American" assumes a communal identity that can severely limit the truth of individuality; yet by engaging racial identity, this anthology seeks to explore the ways in which it was meaningful or relevant to the artists and contexts under examination. Because *Beholding* examines artists whose mature work dates from the Civil War through the civil rights movement (ca. 1860s–1960s), the artists' identity as black Americans carried specific cultural inferences at the time they were producing art.

Being African American within this period highly influenced how an artist's work was framed and interpreted and how the artist might negotiate his or her relationship to racial identity. Many would argue that this endures in current discourses. Bringing together a group of "African American" artists is inherently problematic and limiting, yet it can be enlightening and strategically necessary. The artists included in this anthology respond to their own conceptions of black identity as structured from within and without. Individually, they may cultivate or choose not to engage black identity or a broader black community. Yet inevitably they had to contend with the racial constraints, restrictions, and limitations of museum, gallery, and educational institutions; the discipline of art history; and American society more generally. While these conditions may have limited the discourses and places in which these artists' works were initially discussed and displayed, they also afforded artistic opportunities for creative forms of expression, the circulation of new art and ideas, and conceptually and formally innovative counternarratives of Christianity. This anthology takes into account race as a factor in the articulation of Christian subject matter, but not the only factor. Gender, class, geography, historical period, and background, among other considerations, all come to the foreground in this book as a means of historicizing and contextualizing the artists evaluated. The chapters thus bring about a deeper understanding of the artists' work, identity, and methods of visualizing Christian subjects and symbols.

The assortment of media studied in this collection not only undermines high/low distinctions but also makes clear that African American artists mastered a broad spectrum of artistic creation, from highly academic work, to modernist approaches, to more intuitive and often highly inventive forms of expression. This definition of art includes a broad range of media and methods. Two-dimensional media consist of paintings of oil on canvas or gouache on paper, brush and ink drawings and drawings with crayon and ballpoint pen on cardboard, and photography. Sculpture includes objects cast in bronze and carvings in marble and stone. Created by artists trained in academic traditions as well as untrained and "visionary" artists, these works diverge stylistically and conceptually. This wealth of materials and methods demonstrates the diversity of visualizing

Christianity, complicating how one views African American art and responds to visual expressions of faith. By devoting each chapter to an individual artist and his or her method of addressing Christian motifs, *Beholding* reveals a range of visual methods and conceptual relationships to these subjects and thereby deepens how one views and understands Christian and African American art.

This anthology underscores that the artist's visual articulation of faith and religious practice is no less complicated than his or her representation of race. In many ways, a person's faith in, or doubt of, God is among one's most intimate beliefs. For many artists, their creative process is a means of working out and articulating their convictions. At the same time, religious practice functions as a broader reflection of identity as social, racial, communal, and otherwise. Specific Christian faiths, whether Baptist, Episcopalian, Holiness, Methodist, Roman Catholic, or other denominations, are contextualized by each author in terms of specific historical moments, geographic regions, and socioeconomic foundations. In this way, this book does not analyze one single relationship to religiosity. By eschewing essentialist or limited definitions of Christianity, African American identity, or even "art," this collection opens up a discussion of the complex and interwoven relationship between artist, faith, identity, and community.

The author of Proverbs 29:18 wrote, "Where there is no vision, the people perish." The chapters in this anthology explore whether the inverse is also true: "where there is vision, the people persevere." Such a reading views the work of art as a realization of and instrument for a personal, social, and/or spiritual vision. Although the term visionary is often narrowly applied to the works of nonformally trained artists who view their work as the visual expression of a divinely inspired vision, *Beholding* addresses works of African American art as a realization of and catalyst for transforming vision itself. The artworks discussed herein thus function as a channel for the artist's self-reflection and his or her relationship to Christianity while stimulating the viewer to contemplate the same.

“Choosing Catholicism and celebrating Black Catholic History Month,”
Cecilia Moore, 2018, published in Catholic News Service

From the 1920s through the 1960s, more than 300,000 African-Americans across the country chose to enter into communion with the Roman Catholic Church. Their choices to become Catholic set them apart from most African-American Christians, who were members of Baptist, Methodist, Pentecostal and Holiness traditions.

However, in choosing Catholicism, African-Americans were returning to the earliest Christian traditions of their ancestors. African Christians had figured prominently in shaping the Catholic tradition. They made their imprint on Catholic theology, doctrine and religious practices.

St. Augustine’s teachings on grace and sin, monasticism and traditions related to intercessory prayer are just three examples of African influence on Catholicism. Christian kingdoms flourished for more than four centuries in Egypt, Ethiopia and the Sudan before Christianity had durable roots in Western Europe.

And, although Muslims were successful in establishing their faith throughout North Africa and in parts of sub-Saharan Africa by the ninth century, Christianity did remain in parts of Africa and by the beginning of the 16th century, Catholicism was reintroduced to Africa by way of the trans-Atlantic slave trade.

Twentieth-century African-Americans who chose to become Catholic were rich, poor, middle-class, famous, infamous, ordinary, eccentric, well-educated, poorly educated, Southern, Northern, Midwestern, Western, raised in various Christian churches, religiously unaffiliated, politically engaged, apolitical and so much more.

No matter their individual characteristics, they had their own reasons for choosing Catholicism. Some did so to answer a call to religious life as a priest, sister or brother. Some felt an internal spiritual call to Catholicism. Some joined the Catholic Church because they were married to Catholics, and others were attracted to the faith because they had friends who were Catholics.

There were women and men who found Catholicism to be the truest expression of Christian faith, finding themselves deeply attracted to the rituals and theology of Catholicism. Many were children who learned about Catholicism while attending Catholic schools. It was not uncommon for these children to bring their entire families into the church with them.

Some people became Catholic because when they were in need, the Catholic Church reached out to them. The Catholic Church’s stance on political and social issues drew others to the church. There were also 20th-century African-Americans who became Catholic who said they experienced a sense of equality in the Catholic Church that they did not experience in any other aspect of their lives.

Whatever their reasons for were for choosing Catholicism, African-Americans changed the look and the experience of American Catholicism in the 20th century.

November is Black Catholic History Month. Why not use this November to take some time to learn about some of these 20th-century African-Americans who chose Catholicism and who made great contributions to the American Catholic experience? Here are three that you might consider.

African-American children's book author, Ellen Tarry, became a Catholic when she attended St. Francis de Sales, a Catholic boarding school for African-American girls run by the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament in the early 20th century. As a young woman she got involved in the Harlem Renaissance and in Catholic interracial justice work.

Tarry's books for children featured aspects of Catholicism and African-American life. She also published frequently in Catholic publications on issues that pertained to African-Americans. Her autobiography "The Third Door: The Autobiography of an American Negro Woman" is a fine way to begin learning about her and her contributions to American Catholicism.

Several of the more famous African-Americans who joined the Catholic Church in the 20th century were in the performing arts. Mary Lou Williams is one of the most famous and interesting. Williams was a renowned jazz pianist and composer. She became a Catholic in 1957. She devoted the rest of her life to working to help musicians who suffered from various forms of addiction and to writing music for Catholic worship.

Williams came to regard jazz as a gift that God gave her to give the Catholic Church. Jazz inspired her composition of dozens of hymns and four Masses. The most well-known of these Masses is "Mary Lou's Mass." To learn more about Mary Lou Williams, I recommend "Soul on Soul: The Life and Music of Mary Lou Williams" by Tammy Kernodle.

Finally, an especially fitting way to celebrate Black Catholic History Month would be to read "The History of Black Catholics in the United States" by the late Benedictine Father Cyprian Davis. Davis' work was integral to bringing attention nationally and internationally to the ways that people of African descent helped to develop Catholicism from the earliest days up through the middle of the 20th century. His work helped give rise to Black Catholic History Month.

But, many do not know that Davis also chose Catholicism. From childhood he was fascinated with the history of Africa and of Catholicism. While a teenager in Washington, D.C., he became Catholic. After graduating from high school, Davis entered the monastery of St. Meinrad in Indiana where he taught church history to generations of students.

Though trained in monastic history, Davis is most well-known for developing black Catholic history as a distinctive field study and scholarship around the country, but especially at the Institute for Black Catholic Studies at Xavier University of Louisiana.

“There is a balm in Gilead,” African American Spiritual

Refrain:

There is a balm in Gilead
to make the wounded whole.
There is a balm in Gilead
to heal the sinsick soul.

1. Sometimes I feel discouraged,
and think my work's in vain,
but then the Holy Spirit
revives my soul again.

(Refrain)

2. Don't ever feel discouraged,
for Jesus is your friend,
who, if you ask for knowledge,
will never fail to lend.

(Refrain)

3. If you cannot preach like Peter,
if you cannot pray like Paul,
you can tell the love of Jesus,
who died to save us all.

(Refrain)