

James W. Washington, Jr. (1909-2000): Painter, Activist, Sculptor

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Early Years

James W. Washington, Jr. was born in Gloster, Mississippi in 1909, the fourth child of six. His father, The Reverend James W. Washington was the local Baptist minister. Gloster is thirty miles south of Natchez, at that time a small town with a lumber company and a saw mill, which supplied most of the jobs for blacks and whites. It also had the Ku Klux Klan. As James Washington recounts in his unpublished autobiography: "I remember living in fear most of the time. When I was very young my father had to get out of town. Suddenly. It was said that he had a dispute with a white man . . . (who) threatened to go to the Klan about it. A white friend of my father's hid him in the trunk of his car and drove him out of town. I never saw my father again."

His mother had five children and a baby on the way, with no means of supporting them. She had to send her children to live with relatives and friends. Washington was moved to his grandmother's house when he was seven or eight. There he got his first jobs, and already asserted himself as not willing to be insulted. He quit a delivery job because "I couldn't stand riding my bike to the back door of a white family's home and have the woman who answered the door act like I was there to rob her." He returned to live with his mother when she remarried, and had a deep bond with her until her death in 1944. When he was fourteen, she observed him taking apart an old shoe and found him a job as an apprentice at a shoe store. While working there, he figured out how to do jobs even his boss didn't understand and as he said, "From that day on (he was fourteen) I used my imagination to accomplish things other people assured me were 'impossible.'"

During the 1920s in Mississippi, he went from one job to another in order to survive —shoe repair (illus.), landscaping, lumber mills, assistant to itinerant fruit peddler. Starting in 1927, he also worked intermittently for the U.S. Government on navy boats on the Mississippi as a “sounder,” line splicer, and other short term employment.

At the same time, he began teaching himself art. He studied the principles of color and perspective space from correspondence courses and self instruction. By the mid 1930s, he began to make a name for himself in Vicksburg, Mississippi. As a result, his first major break came in 1938 when the Works Progress Administration (WPA) invited him to work as an artist and recreation assistant at the YMCA in Vicksburg. He later described his work for the New Deal program “I would be asked to hang the paintings of the exhibition for the whites, but then they would remind me that I could not exhibit with them.” In response Washington created “the first Negro art exhibition sponsored by the WPA division of recreation in the state of Mississippi.” This proactive response to discrimination would characterize Washington’s entire career.

The WPA was a significant, but short term, professional boost. Following the WPA job in Vicksburg, he moved to Little Rock, Arkansas in 1941, where his mother was living. After six months he was hired by the War Department at Camp Robinson in the orthopedic shoe repair department, with the elaborate official title “Quarter Master Clothing Equipage.”

In his art from 1938 to 1944, Washington subtly began to celebrate black achievement and community. His small, intensely- colored pastel drawings of Baptist churches in Vicksburg, like *Travellers Rest* (1938) (illus.) and Little Rock, still glow with

his newly acquired skills with color and his exploration of linear perspective. His subjects were sites of black community and achievement, like Baptist churches and Philander Smith College, one of the oldest traditionally black colleges in the country.

While Washington was in Little Rock, the educated black community was deeply involved in Civil Rights activism. As documented in a pamphlet in Washington's archives, the Urban League of Greater Little Rock organized a program called "'The Negro: Some Community Problems in Five Areas'" in September 1942. Washington's early involvement with Civil Rights is also marked by a brochure he saved titled the "'80th Anniversary of Negro Emancipation Celebration"' on January 1, 1943 at the First Baptist Church, Little Rock.

At the same time, in a life-long pattern, Washington paired activism with pursuing his art career. He befriended a white artist, Harry Louis Freund, who was painting murals with the Treasury Department in Arkansas and took private lessons with him. In June 1943, he organized an exhibition with Freund at the 9th street USO in Little Rock (a segregated USO). Washington showed his flare for self-promotion and his serious commitment to art by identifying himself in the brochure as the "James W. Washington School of Art." Freund gave a lecture as part of the exhibition and they remained friends after he moved to the Northwest.

In the Northwest

James W. Washington, Jr. arrived in the Northwest from Little Rock, Arkansas, in August 1944. He came as a Civil Servant, one of thousands of African Americans who migrated to the Northwest during World War II as support personnel to the active military. His wife, Janie R. Washington, followed in later in the same fall. He and Janie

lived in Sinclair Heights, a government housing development in Bremerton occupied only by African Americans. They moved to Seattle in August 1945 into the house that is today the James W. Washington Foundation and Studio (illus.). Washington experienced discrimination from both Whites and the “old timer” Blacks who were already established in a relatively unsegregated Seattle. They referred to the influx of Southern Blacks during the war as “newcomers” and “sharecroppers.”

Washington wrote about the difficulty of joining unions and getting jobs in Seattle. This experience would lead to his focus on job discrimination and labor negotiations during his participation in the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) in Seattle in the 1950s and 1960s.

But Washington always emphasizes the positive in his autobiography: “Some Blacks leave the South with a chip on their shoulder. They assume, and many of them believe now, that all Whites are dangerous. They think all Whites are out to get them. I don’t believe this because I accept everyone as an individual . . . Despite the inequities in society I found it necessary to develop ideas about the potential for good in other people.”

But he now emerged as a leader in resisting discrimination. In 1946 he chaired a discussion in Sinclair Heights as chair of the education committee for the Elks Olympic Lodge. The topic was “Is the Negro being permitted to fully participate in the special job opportunities in the Northwest?” Sinclair Heights was being disbanded following the war and the problem of further employment for African Americans was acute.

At the same time, he actively pursued his career as an artist. Only one short month after he moved to the Northwest, Washington took the ferry from the Bremerton navy

base to visit the Gallery of Northwest Painters in the Frederick and Nelson Department Store in Seattle. He boldly approached the director, Theodora Lawrenson Harrison. Harrison gave him a two person show in January 1946 with Leo Kenney, later a well known Northwest artist. His immediate success was the result of his charm, and directness, the strength of his art, the smallness of the Seattle art scene, and Harrison's own dynamic personality. She included him in a 1946 group exhibition in Chicago, "Northwest Paintings Go East" with Mark Tobey, Kenneth Callahan and thirty-seven other Northwest artists and encouraged Washington to meet Mark Tobey.

As lynchings multiplied for African American veterans, Washington made his first sculpture *The Chaotic Half* (1946) carved on a 4 x 4 inch block of found wood (illus.). In painted low relief, the hand of the black voter reaches for the ballot box; behind a diagonal red line, indicating a wall, is a menacing Klansman, a swinging noose, a cross and the all seeing eye. In this simple work Washington incorporated his frightening childhood in the South where he felt perpetually under surveillance, his disgust with the continued lynching of black veterans, and his hope for democracy.

In the second half of the 1940s, Washington spent several years in informal classes at Mark Tobey's studio. With his encouragement, Washington enlarged his scale, included collaged newspaper clippings, changed his subject matter, and began to explore symbolism. While pasted newspapers had been included in modern art since 1910, Washington adapted it to his own purposes by selecting clippings about specific racist events that expanded the theme of his painting.

The Making of the United Nations Charter, completed in early August 1945, was focused on a particular political act of discrimination. He declared that the painting

“depicts the chaotic condition which existed when the [UN] charter was being formulated. Black men were dying in the wars (as symbolized by the skeletal hand), but were not represented in the formation of the charter. W.E.B. DuBois was allowed to speak for a few minutes, but they would not let him pen an amendment, as symbolized by the safety pin in the hand.” The oil painting includes eight carefully selected clippings that refer to specific racist events such as violence at a Paul Robeson’s concert.

Democracy Challenged (Lynching) (October 1949), the last of his works to directly address racism is the most graphic. It is based, according to Washington on *Ezekiel 37:9* “breathe into these slain, that they may live.” He represents the scales of justice with a lynched family on one side and the Statue of Liberty barely visible on the other. Seven newspaper clippings expand on the meaning of the work. The most prominent is the headline behind the Statue of Liberty in the upper left: “Fiery Cross KKK Note Found Near Home.”

Still part of the Civil Service he transferred to Fort Lawton in 1948 where he was asked to set up and run a shoe shop on the military base. His brightly colored painting of the *Shoe Repair Shop (Fort Lawton, Washington)* (1948) includes all of the equipment that he assembled, as well as some of his paintings hanging on the walls. In an interview in 1989, he spoke of the racism he encountered at Fort Lawton and subsequent jobs for the Civil Service. At the same time, though, he managed to counter his problems with tactical maneuvers that made it possible for him to be continuously employed and even promoted at a time when many Blacks were unemployed after the wartime surge of employment.

After 1949 Washington changed his art: he emphasized his belief in the interconnectedness of all people, the idea of universal spirituality. Motivated by this belief, he participated in interracial art and cultural organizations like Artists Equity founded in Seattle in 1948. The roster lists almost 50 members including University of Washington faculty, Glen Alps, Walter Isaacs, and George Tsutakawa, as well as Mark Tobey, and, of course James Washington. Washington was appointed Secretary of the Seattle Chapter of Artists Equity in December 1951. He served as President from 1960 - 62. With other Artist Equity members, he pioneered Rental Art exhibitions and an annual exhibition in department store windows on Pine Street in Seattle. Through the national network of Artists Equity, he also gained opportunities to show his work in other states, and to travel as a representative of the organization to St. Louis and New York City.

In 1950 and 1951 Washington participated in two “international exhibitions” with Japanese American and Chinese artists. These are landmark events in the history of Seattle art since they included artists who had been interned during World War II, like Kinjiro Namura, artists newly gaining recognition, like Paul Horiuchi, and artists who had been successful for many years such as George Tsutakawa, Fay Chong and Andrew Chinn, in an exhibition in the streets of Seattle’s International District.

Also pursuing his hope for interracial harmony, Washington launched an annual multi racial art exhibition at the historically black Mt Zion Baptist Church. He transformed the Baptist Training Union, an educational organization in the Baptist Church, into a means of displaying art. As he later explained “Back in the 1940s in Seattle there was an exceptional Black preacher, F. Benjamin Davis of the Mt Zion Missionary Baptist Church. After I found out that Blacks were not welcome in most of

the city's White districts I told him the solution would be to put on an art exhibition and invite both Blacks and Whites to participate.”

Thus began the Mt Zion Art Show in 1948, for which Washington drew in the major White artists of the city at that time, professors from the University of Washington, curators from the Seattle Art Museum and others. Integration in Seattle was still far away, but in these shows Washington realized his idea that art is an international language. In 1950 Mark Tobey was a keynote speaker. Kenneth Callahan was involved as a juror and participant for several years (illus.). The exhibition continued for thirteen years, until 1961.

After the art exhibitions ended, Washington organized Maundy Thursday Seder suppers at Mt. Zion. He invited people from all spiritual backgrounds and professions. Jacob Lawrence and his wife Gwendolyn Knight, who moved to Seattle in 1971, participated in one of these Seders, as did Regina Hackett, at that time beginning her long career as art critic for the *Seattle Post Intelligencer*.

Washington Becomes a Sculptor

On a trip to Mexico in 1951 Washington met Diego Rivera and David Alfaro Siqueiros, the famous Mexican muralists. While visiting Teotihuacán, the ancient Meso-American site near Mexico City, he impulsively picked up a volcanic stone from the site. This stone inspired him to make the bold change to working primarily in carved stone. His first major sculpture *Young Queen of Ethiopia* (1956, Collection of the National Museum of American Art), cut from a small block of limestone, connects to African American history and civil rights.

As a result of his wife's financial support through her work as a nurse, Washington was able to leave the Civil Service to be a full time artist in 1960. In 1962 he traveled to seventeen countries, making appointments to meet artists everywhere he went through embassies and local art academies. One of the places that impressed him was Jerusalem, with its intersections of many different religions. Not long after his trip, he created a portrait in sandstone of *Jomo Kenyatta*. In 1962, as Washington was making his sculpture, Kenyatta had just been released from jail and by 1964 he would be President of newly independent Kenya.

Throughout these years, Washington also actively participated in the Civil Rights struggle in Seattle. Active in the NAACP from the 1940s, he became Labor Chairman for the NAACP and CORE in the early 1960s. He and his committee received and evaluated claims of racist practices against black employees, and negotiated with employers based on statistical evidence to force hiring blacks in positions other than janitors. He organized picket lines against stores who continued racist hiring practices, made banners for demonstrations, and much more.

In 1968, at the height of the Civil Rights movement, Washington was invited by the Reverend Leon Sullivan of Philadelphia to create an installation of sculptures for a minority-owned shopping plaza in Philadelphia. Washington created six busts from granite for what he called The Rotunda of Achievement. They included Frederick Douglass, George Washington Carver, the great scientist of Tuskegee, and Martin Luther King, Jr.(illus). The Rotunda of Achievement was dedicated in October 1969. Sadly, because of racial tensions in Philadelphia, the sculptures were vandalized the day after they were installed. The violence of the defacement, painting the dignified black portraits

with whitewash, suggests how effectively Washington's art presented African Americans. These portraits, lost to sight for many years, were rediscovered only in 2009, stored behind a wall in the office of the shopping plaza.

From 1970 to the end of his life Washington did not depict individuals in his sculpture, with one exception. In 1976, the year that Mark Tobey died, he honored him with a portrait. At the same time, he made a self portrait. Toby's portrait on a slab of limestone set on a stunning wood burl includes a summation of many of his favorite symbols. In his *Self Portrait* the artist seems to commune with a small bird that symbolized freedom for him.

Washington's sculptures range from small enough to hold in a hand to monumental boulders for public spaces. In the smaller works, Washington carved a single animal or bird, with just a few chisel marks. But in those marks he always respected the contours of the stone, and revealed the creature itself. In his largest works he used symbols drawn from the masons, the Bible, science and numerology with animals and birds. His large public art sculptures can be seen at public schools, libraries, churches, banks, and on the campus of the State Capitol in Olympia, Washington.

By the time of his death in 2000, Washington's work was collected by hundreds of people and his public art had become part of the fabric of the Northwest. The highly resistant granite and basalt that he chose to use for most of his sculpture was a metaphor, he said, of the difficulties of life. His early chalk drawings of African American churches, his 1940s sculpture and paintings about racism, and his stone sculptures, were all dedicated to celebrating creativity as an alternative to violence and as a means to universal harmony.

In that spirit the James W. Washington Foundation today sponsors a lively artist-in-residence program, drawing artists from all over the state to work the several studios that Washington built behind his house. Each of the artists who have participated have responded in a different way to the spirit of James W. Washington, Jr., some to the unused stones he left in the garden, some to his tools left in the studio, others listened to his recorded speeches or read his poetry. All of them responded to the spirit of the house itself. His creative legacy continues to transform itself.

The living room and dining room of his house, which through his foresight and efforts was designated as an historic landmark, was transformed in 2009-2010 into an intimate installation of artifacts that document his and Janie R. Washington's life and achievements from their roots in the South to their contributions to the cultural life of the Northwest.

The James Washington Foundation and Studio is located at
1816 26th ave, Seattle Wa 98122
It is open to the public by appointment
206 709 4241