The Color of

Romare Bearden
Mississippi Monday, n.d., collage
Collection of Arizona State University Art Museum
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. James Hatcher

Henry Colescott
Choctaw Nickel, 1994, acrylic

Charles White

Dolor Negro, 1946, lithograph; Collection of Arizona State University Art Museum
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Jules Heller

Raymond Saunders
Street Singing, 1990, mixed media
Stephan Wirtz Gallery

Robert Colescott
Charcoal Nicked, 1994, acrylic
Young's journey began in 1966 with a visit to Philadelphia's venerable Haddington Library. He was trying to find books about artists of color. Today he is writing those books and making sure that they are available to everyone.

"I grew up feeling good about being African-American. I wanted to find artists who painted the inner city experience, which was my experience," explains Young. "My art work involved landscapes about city life—tall buildings, people of color. I wanted to find out if there were people who made pictures like that.

"I went to the library and couldn't find any books, so I asked one of the librarians, an African-American. She said they didn't exist," he says. "But I knew that there were artists working in this tradition. I began to wonder why they were being ignored. If they weren't on the shelves of a major metropolitan library, there was a serious problem."

Young started touring studios and interviewing multicultural artists. "I wanted to find out how they learned their craft. Who did they talk to? Where did they find materials?" he explains.

Young discovered the work of Henry O. Tanner and Jacob Lawrence, both of whom celebrated black life in their artwork. Lawrence, who in the 1950s earned several national awards for his paintings and exhibited his work at the Whitney and the Art Institute of Chicago, has only recently been added to the mainstream of recognized artists.

Young points to the few references of African-American artists in H.W. Janson's art history text, often considered the "bible" of the field. "It's even worse for Mexican-American and Native American artists," Young says. "While there is plenty of information about Diego Rivera and Jose Clemente Orozco, who are Mexican, you would be hard-pressed to find anything about contemporary Mexican-American artists."

"It's all about how the canon was set during the Renaissance," explains Betsy Fahlman, an ASU art history professor. "It's a very slow process of anointing certain art works as acceptable. The people who write the books are products of art history programs. It has been very slow to change because institutions by their very nature are slow to change."

Often, it is museums that establish whose work will be added to the lexicon. Minority artists have always held back-of-the-bus status. "Benchmark collections, such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, let the art world know that these artists have arrived," adds Fahlman.

Since the directors of most museums are white men, there are few acquisitions of art by African American, Native American, and Chicano artists.

The Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s spurred many artists, such as Faith Ringgold, to openly protest museums' lack of diversity. More recently, Young recalls a conversation with a well-known contemporary artist of color who was asked by a major museum for
the best example of his work. This form of tokenism, according to Young, is taking decades to change.

“Museums are slow to collect too many art works by one artist. Once museums get one work by a major African-American artist, they may choose to not get another.”

As an author and former president of the higher education division of the National Art Education Association, Young has been able to bring many of these issues to the table. His book, Art, Culture and Ethnicity, was first published in 1990. He has taken multicultural issues to the forefront of the public education system, and is changing the curriculum in public schools. Since his tenure with NAEA, six more books have been dedicated to the subject. “I’d like to think I started that,” he says.

“Every elementary and secondary student should know the work of Romare Bearden, Jacob Lawrence, Elizabeth Catlett, Betty Saar, and John Biggers, among others,” Young says.

Fahlman agrees. “It's making the field reflect the area and connects with the audience. The reality is that we don’t have one culture. We live in a pluralistic society. This gives the field a greater texture and also tells us that art history is not static. It changes and just gets richer,” she says.

Subsequent publications, including Young’s most recent book, African-American Arts and Culture, present the teaching of art from a multicultural perspective. He promotes this idea through his work with the ASU’s annual Children’s Art Workshop. Started in 1985, the program has drawn thousands of children to the ASU campus for instruction in creative expression through the visual arts. Young is the longtime director of the Workshop. He advocates viewing art through the eyes of its creator.

Susanna Yazzie is an art education graduate and student teacher at a Mesa middle school. She puts into practice what she learned from Young about teaching art within a multicultural context. “If I am presenting a lesson about Native American art, I might bring in images of buffalo skin painting and talk about why that object was important to the tribe,” Yazzie explains. “These paintings weren’t made by artists, but by tribal historians who wanted to depict an event. The concept of ‘artist’ was, and is, very different to Native Americans.”

Young thinks that now more than ever, it is important to tailor lessons to a multicultural student body. According to the latest census, more than 35 percent of all students in kindergarten through grade 12 are children of color—and that number is growing rapidly. In many cities, the white population has ceased to be the majority. Yet only 5 percent of the teachers are African-American.

“As schools become more ethnically diverse, it is crucial that the art curricula become more inclusive of multicultural artists and writers,” Young says. He is disturbed by the number of African American and Hispanic teachers who have left, or don’t even consider teaching, opting instead for more lucrative careers in other fields.

“Students need role models of their own color. They need to see successful people of color who reflect their cultural heritage,” he says. “It raises their aspirations and gives them what corporations call an ‘insider’s’ point of view. By the very presence of those teachers, kids learn that they too can go to college.”

Young has taken his mission to the Internet. He is a consultant for The Getty Center for Education in the Arts near Los Angeles. He is creating lesson plans for the Center’s ArtNet Internet site. “Teachers can download these resources at no cost,” he says. “Hopefully, they will make a difference in raising the profile of minority artists.”

For more information about this scholarship or to learn more about the ASU Children’s Art Workshop, contact Bernard Young, Ph.D., School of Art, Katherine K. Herberger College of Fine Arts, 480-965-3341. Send e-mail to bernard.young@asu.edu. Visit the school’s Web site at http://herbergercollege.asu.edu/art.
Each and every fall, several hundred Phoenix-area children climb the stairs at ASU’s Art Building, take crayons, pencils, paintbrushes, and clay in hand, and embark on a 10-week journey of self-expression. The Children’s Art Workshop is led by Bernard Young, an ASU professor of art. The workshop is designed to offer quality instruction using art materials and techniques for rendering images not available at tightly budgeted school districts. The program has been credited as a creative way to teach art to children whose public school experiences are often limited to craft projects.

Students of all ages hone their creative skills by experimenting with several media, including drawing, painting, printmaking, photography, and sculpture. In addition to the “nuts and bolts” of creating art, students also learn how contemporary and historic artworks relate to everyday life and culture, explains Young, who has taught art education at ASU since 1988.

“Every process, from painting to photography, is explored in context with the artwork of an individual artist, culture, style and/or time period.”

Undergraduate and graduate students working toward art education certification teach all classes, making the program a “win-win” for both students and teachers. Occasionally, students grow up to become teachers.

“I loved art as a kid. I didn’t get enough of it in public school, so I took both morning and afternoon classes at the CAW,” said Kamala Miller, who eventually majored in art education and taught in the program.

—DIANNE CRIPE

To learn more about the ASU Children’s Art Workshop, call 480.965.4951.