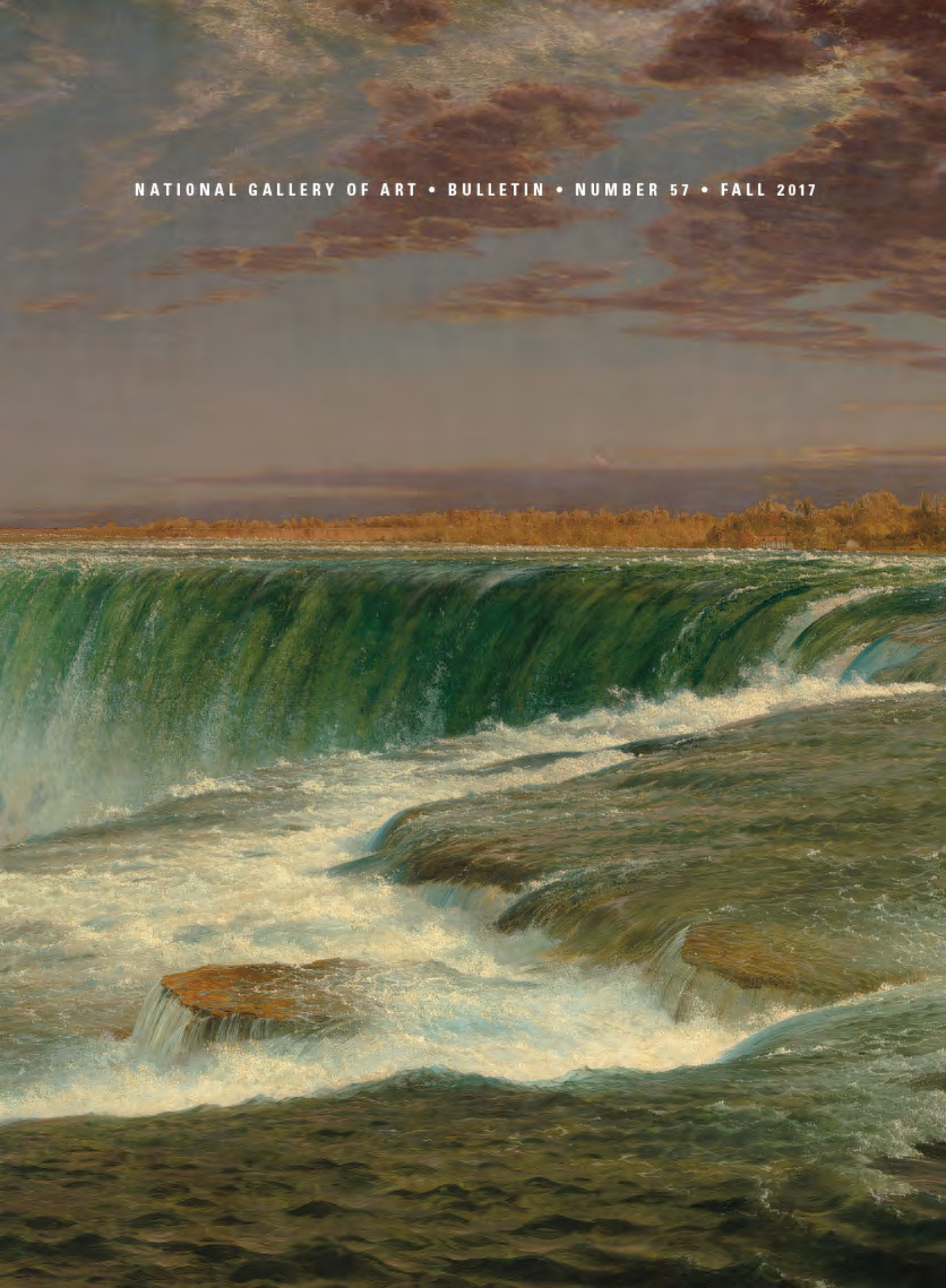


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CASVA

Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts

A Celebration of African American Art in Washington, DC

This year's biennial Wyeth Foundation for American Art Symposium, organized in collaboration with the Howard University Gallery of Art, was dedicated to the celebration and historical interpretation of the African American art world in twentieth-century Washington, DC. The two-day meeting was a crowning event in the seventy-fifth anniversary year of the National Gallery of Art. When the Gallery opened its doors on March 17, 1941, it was one of the few public spaces in the nation's capital where racial segregation was neither enforced nor practiced. Howard University, which celebrated its sesquicentennial this year, played a central role in the post-World War II civil rights revolution in the District. It also occupied an especially important place in the arts on a national level. Art was part of training in Howard's Normal Department from its founding, and the first teacher of drawing was appointed in 1871; but from the creation of the independent art department under James V. Herring (1922), to the opening of the new Gallery of Art (1930), and the establishment of a major in art history (1940)

and MA and MFA degrees (1960), Howard's record of teaching and practice in the visual arts, including architecture, is exceptional. The university's art department, the first African American-affiliated art department to become a member of the National Association of Schools of Art, has, in the words of distinguished alumnus David Driskell, been "in a class to itself." The Wyeth Symposium also provided an opportunity to salute the Gallery's newest neighbor on the Mall, the National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC), and members of its curatorial staff played a major role in the success of the program.

The original impetus for a scholarly examination of the topic came from the acquisition of the Corcoran Collection, first agreed upon in August 2014, but the complexity of which has required years of work. A major part of this process involved the accessioning by the Gallery of a priceless collection of some two hundred works by more than twenty African American artists. Within that collection, given to the Corcoran in 1996, was a group of thirty-three masterworks from the Evans-Tibbs Collection of African American art. The significance of this collection within a collection was such that the Gallery determined that it should be kept intact, together with the historical archive compiled by its original donor to the Corcoran, Thurlow Evans Tibbs Jr. (fig. 1).

A brilliant connoisseur, collector, and dealer, Thurlow Evans Tibbs Jr.

belonged to a distinguished Washington family. He died too young, in 1997, at the age of forty-four. Educated at Dartmouth and Harvard, he grew up in his grandmother's house at 1910 Vermont Avenue NW, which was listed in the National Register of Historic Places upon her death. It eventually became his home and gallery. His grandmother Lillian Evans Tibbs (fig. 2) was the great-great niece of Hiram Revels, the first African American elected to the US Senate, in 1870. She herself received a degree in music from Howard University in 1913, marrying Roy W. Tibbs, a member of the Howard faculty, in 1918. Prevented from pursuing a career as an opera singer in the United States, she left for Europe and enjoyed considerable success performing as Madame Evanti. On her return she worked to establish the Negro National Opera Company in Philadelphia in 1942. Until her death in 1967 Lillian Evans Tibbs worked ceaselessly as a cultural ambassador in support of Pan-Americanism and black American culture, especially in the arts, establishing a salon in her house. This long family history of political and cultural engagement is essential for understanding that Thurlow Evans Tibbs Jr.'s passionate collecting was not driven only by a wish to own art but was inseparable from his even larger commitment to promoting, documenting, and cataloging the work of African American artists, both famous and little known.

The curatorial work of cataloging and displaying works from this extraordinary acquisition, which includes Aaron Douglas's iconic *Into Bondage* as well as works by Lois Mailou Jones, Betye Saar, Elizabeth Catlett, Henry Ossawa Tanner, Hale Woodruff,



Fig. 1. The Evans-Tibbs Archive display for the 2017 Wyeth Foundation for American Art Symposium at the National Gallery of Art

Fig. 2. Addison Scurlock, *Portrait of Madame Evanti (Lillian Evans Tibbs)*, c. 1934, gelatin silver print, Corcoran Collection (The Evans-Tibbs Collection, Gift of Thurlow Evans Tibbs Jr.)

Sargent Claude Johnson, and many others, was both challenging and thrilling. When it was determined that the Evans-Tibbs Archive, so crucial to the understanding of the history of African American artists, especially in DC, would also be in the Gallery's safekeeping, CASVA realized something further must be done to recognize this. Research and scholarship in the visual arts and the broad diffusion of new knowledge and ideas are central to CASVA's mission. Working with the National Gallery of Art Library, where the Evans-Tibbs Archive is kept, and with the generous cooperation of gallery curators, CASVA wanted to let the larger community know that these materials are here and available for research. The hope is that a new generation of researchers will explore the archive and investigate the paintings by artists it includes. Thurlow Evans Tibbs Jr. expressed this when he remarked of his passion in 1984, "There is so much in this area that hasn't been done... I just wish I could get someone to help with it all."

In addition to exploring the Evans Tibbs legacy, the symposium presented new research relating to the history of Howard University's art program, the role of art galleries and collectors (including Duncan Phillips) in DC, and the family history of the Scurlock Studio of photography. New ground was broken in discussions of such individual artists, performers, and educators as Alain Locke, Romare Bearden, Duke Ellington, Alma Thomas, James A. Porter, Jeff Donaldson, and Ed Love. From the opening remarks by Kinshasha Holman Conwill, deputy director of the NMAAHC and Howard graduate, to the closing paper, "A Chocolate City Revisited," by Duke University professor Richard J. Powell, who holds an MFA degree from Howard, the audience gained a deeper



understanding of the importance of the Washington, DC, art world and of the interconnectedness of the institutions that participated in and supported a thriving national and international African American culture in the twentieth century. The symposium papers will be published in CASVA's *Studies in the History of Art* series.

Equally historic was the panel of artists that was folded into the symposium. Eight distinguished artists spoke of their experiences growing up in and around Washington, with special emphasis on their education and their sources of inspiration. Ruth Fine, retired curator at the Gallery, moderated this lively and moving session. Each autobiographical memory provided an intense insight into creative lives often fraught with difficulty but charged with courage and mutual

respect. The panel discussion is available as a video podcast on the Gallery's website and provides much material for future study.

The mid-twentieth century is not so far away, but the history of African American art and culture in the nation's capital remains much less thoroughly documented and understood than, for example, the Harlem Renaissance. Thurlow Evans Tibbs Jr. understood that. The National Gallery of Art is committed to the safekeeping of his gift for future generations and to making accessible its wealth of cultural knowledge and art in partnership with other institutions, both new and old, which have their own considerable archival and artistic resources to preserve and share. • Elizabeth Cropper, *Dean, Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts*