

CPCS Honors Black History Month 2024

Black History Month 2024 is focused on considering the theme of “African Americans and the Arts.” This note is intended to share just a few images, links, and other references to Black creative achievement, a subject that is expansive well beyond these pages.

This rich history reflects the Black experience, too often influenced by the undying reality of bias, prejudice, and pain. The pervasive nature of this insult can be found across all art genres, and it makes a statement about the waking reality for millions of Black people in this country, which leads to exhaustion and frustration over the insufficiency of change. Hopefully, this note will underscore the importance of appreciating the designs, poetry, song, comedy, dance, and acting that the Black community has contributed, but also help us see the pain that drives creativity, which can enable each of us to better appreciate, empathize with and respect Black clients, colleagues, family members, and friends.

“You can’t sit around and wait for somebody to say who you are. You need to write it and paint it and do it.” — Faith Ringgold



“Dear Selma,” 2010, Faith Ringgold (the words on the design read, “To Selma Burke, 1900-1995, Dear Selma - Every time I see a dime I think of you. In 1944 when President Franklin Delano Roosevelt posed for your portrait plaque of him, little did you know this masterful relief profile would show up without attribution, on the dime in 1945 – for all the world to see.”

The harsh experiences Black people live with today, while not the slavery, Jim Crow, or denial of human and equal rights suffered over centuries, still compel

remembering and living with the pain of the past, which can trigger hopelessness and exhaustion toward the future. This hardship has inspired Black artists to share work that validates, provokes, and inspires, so that others might see, think, and act differently, by realizing that Black people are not living equal lives within the professed spirit and purpose of our country for freedom.

“Last time I was down South I walked into this restaurant, and this white waitress came up to me and said: 'We don't serve colored people here.' "I said: 'that's all right, I don't eat colored people. Bring me a whole fried chicken.'" Comedian and political activist Dick Gregory

Leveraging insight, wit, and irony born of experience, Black comedians excel in the art of persuasion, as theorized centuries ago by the Greek philosopher Aristotle. They take audiences on journeys that include ethos (credibility) and pathos (empathy) to logos (seeing the logic of the thoughts shared), often with the Black experience at its core. This genre has transcended the cruel, racist humor born of slavery and Jim Crow, through the “blue” party records of Redd Foxx and LaWanda Page, to the in-your-face Black realities riffed by Dick Gregory, Richard Pryor, Eddie Murphy, Whoopi Goldberg and Wanda Sykes, among many others. That wisdom is oft captured in song, a subject too immense to explore here, but please consider the jazz-based sample of wit and irony below as Black art through music.

“(What did I do) to be so Black and Blue”

Fats Waller, jazz pianist, organist, composer and singer

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dqimf_91AU (by Louis Armstrong)



“I suffered first as a child from discrimination, poverty ... So I think it was a natural follow from that that I should use my camera to speak for people who are unable to speak for themselves.” — Gordon Parks

Pictures are art that forces the viewer to see what is real, while stimulating imagination to places of awakening and understanding within the images portrayed. A single photo of Emmett Till’s distorted visage in death moved this country to see the harsh reality of racial violence and injustice and was a critical catalyst in the Civil Rights Movement. The woman and child in the Gordon Parks photo, above, further manifests what capturing a moment can bring to our thoughts and feelings about the unfairness of treating people differently.¹

Today, the Black community lives with the harsh reality of being over-policed, suspected without cause, and denied opportunities and liberties because of the color of their skin, and not, as Dr. King posited, “the content of (their) character.” These barriers cross the lines of class, gender, education, and professional status, which fuels the feeling of exhaustion among Black people, whether in public, in our workplace, or in the courts and agencies where we practice law. While art can underscore and call out indignity and pain, it cannot substitute for what each of us can and should do when we do not live with this unjustified and biased treatment.

In Spike Lee’s films, from “Do the Right Thing,” to “School Daze” and “Malcolm X,” among others, his characters and themes often reach a crescendo that exhorts us all to “WAKE UP!” For CPCS, even as we dedicate our lives to the cause of justice, waking up means that we have incomplete journeys to build racial acuity, compassion, and commitment to change against outrages that refuse to die. The truth is that consciously or unconsciously, we continue to cause or support bias, and must fight in small, personal ways as much as on an organizational or societal scale to stop this harm. Please take time this month, CPCS, to take in Black art across its breadth and depth, considering where you are in the struggle for change and what more you can do for equality – then, commit to take those next steps.

¹ In 2022, an article was written about the life of the little girl in the Parks’ picture, Shirley Blackwell. Please learn about the struggles this photo led to in Shirley and her family’s lives - <https://www.esquire.com/entertainment/a38269023/life-magazine-gordon-parks-photo-true-story-shirley-allie-lee-causey/>