

**THE NATIONAL ALLIANCE OF ARTISTS FROM HBCUS:
A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW**

By

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The National Alliance of Artists from HBCUs was founded during the summer of 2000 on the campus of Morris Brown College in Atlanta, Georgia. Dr. Lee Ransaw, then Dean of Arts & Letters, and Chair of the Fine Art Department, along with Lamar Wilson, Director of the newly renovated Ruth Hall Hodges Art Gallery, initially sought to hold a Statewide exhibit that featured the artwork of the art faculty from HBCU schools in Georgia. However, they quickly realized how important a collaboration would be if the invitation was extended to other HBCU colleges and universities outside the State of Georgia. A broader invitation was then sent to all of the HBCU art departments and art Programs, and a year later (2001), the formation of The National Alliance of Artists began. This effort and the response from these institutions became extremely important because it quickly began to fill an enormous communication gap that existed among art faculty teaching in HBCU art programs in America. Very few knew others outside of their own region. Among the twelve Charter Members who responded and attended the first organizational meeting were Dr. Peggy Blood, Chair of Art at Savannah State University; Phillip R. Dotson, Professor of Art and Program Director at LeMoyne Owen College in Memphis, Tennessee; Marvette Pratt Aldridge, Assistant Professor of Art at Winston-Salem State University in North Carolina; Professor William Anderson, Morehouse College in Atlanta; Professor Hassan Kirkland, Johnson C. Smith University; Associate Professor Charnelle Holloway of Spelman College, and Anita B. Knox of Talladega College in Alabama. “During our first organizational meeting, we created our name, laid the groundwork for our first collaborative art exhibit for HBCU art faculty and conducted a two-day drawing and painting workshop at Morris Brown College for art majors. Students from Spelman, Morris Brown College, Savannah State University, Clark Atlanta University and Morehouse College received lodging and meals while participating in the workshops. These studio sessions were led by outstanding studio art professors from these HBCUS.”

In 2002, The National Alliance of Artists held its first major traveling exhibition entitled “*Visions From Within*” at the James Kemp Gallery at The Black Academy of Arts & Letters in Dallas, Texas. This remarkable exhibit allowed more than 30 member artists to make expressive statements using their craftsmanship, and placed some of them on the national stage for the first time. It was here in Dallas that the Executive Committee elected its first slate of Officers, shaped their Constitution, and carefully developed their long range mission. The shared Mission of the National Alliance of Artists has been to bring artists and art education programs to the forefront of American art and to keep these

programs as institutional priorities for generations to come. The Alliance is also committed to expanding the vision of HBCU art majors and help them shape their artistic and life skills. In an effort to implement the Mission over the years, the organization highlighted the artistic achievements of their members through exhibitions, shared information on current technology, art history as well as art trends. In 2004-5 the exhibition “*Visions From Within*” traveled to The APEX Museum in Atlanta, The National Center for the Study of Civil Rights at Alabama State University in Montgomery and the Arthur Rose Museum at Claflin University in Orangeburg, South Carolina. Another important thematic exhibit, entitled “*Prevalence of Ritual*” traveled to West Virginia State University and to New York.

Attracted to The NAAHBCU were outstanding artists and educators who have since become the backbone of the organization. Among this group are legends such as the late Benny Andrews, who attended Ft. Valley State College and wrote the introduction to “*The Visions From Within*” catalog; Dr. Leo F. Twiggs, the first African American Art graduate from the University of Georgia in Athens, Georgia; Dr. William Colvin Colvin, first African American graduate from the doctoral program at Illinois State University and Chairman of the Art Department at Alabama State University for many years. One artist of note, Louis Delsarte, who many critics believe to be one of the most important contemporary African American artists working today, became an active member. The current list is exceptionally long with more than 70 artists and art educators exhibiting their works. Many NAAHBCU artists have roots in the South and feel strongly about issues that affect everyone such as racial justice, law & order, social welfare, education and Civil Rights. These are dominant issues in the Black community the NAAHBCU has delighted in recent opportunities to visually express deep feelings on these issues. Such museums as The National Study of Civil Rights, The APEX Museum, The Birmingham Civil Rights Institute, and North Carolina State A & T University in Greensboro have showcased notable traveling exhibits such as “*The Quest for Black Citizenship in the Americas*,” “*Civil Rights: A 50 Year Reflection*.” “*Bloody Sunday on the Edmund Pettus Bridge*” and “*Coming by Force: Overcoming by Choice*.”

The Conceptualization of the “*Coming by Force: Overcoming by Choice*” Exhibit

Perhaps the one exhibit that defined the social spirit of NAAHBCU was clearly discernible in the creation of the powerful slavery exhibit entitled “*Coming by Force: Overcoming by Choice.*” During the summer of 2006, Lee Ransaw, NAAHBCU President and also a member of The Board of Directors at The APEX Museum, was sitting in the museum’s main gallery trying to formulate ideas about how the wall space in the museum could best be utilized for a future exhibit during the National Black Arts Festival. The North wall, which measured 20’ in length and about 18’ in height, was completely blank at the time. Since this was on a Monday, the gallery was empty. There was minimum lighting and the room was quiet. After a rather lengthy time with few ideas, Ransaw turned his chair around to face the North wall. Suddenly, Lee indicated that an image of slave ship seemed to appear on this wall. Excitement was immediate as he visualized the horrors and brutality that took place aboard the deck of the ship, and the miserable and inhumane conditions that existed below in the bowels of the ship. At that point, more ideas seemed to flow.

Lee presented the idea of a slavery exhibition to Dan Moore, President of the Museum, who also became energized and wanted to see detailed plans. Ransaw then contacted the Executive Committee of The NAAHBCU for feedback with the idea of actually building a model slave ship and having a thematic exhibition. The accompanying exhibit would be about the life in Africa before slavery, the voyage through the “Middle Passage,” and plantation life and emancipation. The Executive Committee endorsed the project and a proposed budget was presented to and approved by The Museum’s Board of Directors. The Rodney Collier Construction company built and painted the ship. It was cut away in three sections in order that everyone could see below deck. Above deck there was a cannon, a Captain’s Quarters, Masts and sails. The ship measured 15’ in length and 7’ from ground to the deck. The ship was scaled to 1/15th the actual size of an actual slave ship. Below deck, tightly stacked were actual mannequins, painted and scantily dressed with shackles around their bleeding ankles. Six artists, Rickey Calloway, Aaron Henderson, Roederick Vines, Robert Carter, Louis Delsarte, and Ransaw painted 36”x48” canvases which were placed side by side on the deck of the ship. Their themes depicted the brutality and unimaginable horror that took place daily. Their themes embraced “Force Feeding,” “Revolt,” “Rape,” “Forced Dancing” and “Punishment.” More than 30 additional artists added to the overall exhibition and vividly expressed their feelings through various media.



***Photo of the Interior of the slave ship as it appeared in “The New York Times”
During the summer of 2006 – The APEX Museum in Atlanta, Georgia***

When the exhibit closed, The APEX Museum decided to make the slave ship a permanent installation. The exhibition next traveled to The National Center for the Study of Civil Rights and African American Culture in Montgomery, Alabama. The Center contracted the same construction company to build a model ship in their gallery. They also were so pleased, that the ship is now a part of their permanent collection. The exhibition next traveled to the Firehouse Art Gallery in Nassau Community College in Garden City, New York and the African American Museum of Education in Hempstead, New York.

SUMMARY

The National Alliance of Artists from Historically Black Colleges and Universities is a flourishing arts organization by name and service. The overwhelming number of artists within the organization are either working at, or have taught or studied in art departments and programs at historically Black colleges and universities. One of the goals of the NAAHBCU is to bring the visual arts experience to not only the African American Museums and galleries throughout The United States, but to galleries and venues in mainstream America. Member artists are currently exhibiting in mainstream galleries and museums throughout America and abroad. One goal was accomplished in January of 2010 when “***Coming by Force: Overcoming by Choice***” opened at the Firehouse Gallery at Nassau Community College in New York. This is the largest community college in America with more than 23,000 students.

During the summer of 2010, Dr. Ransaw, the founder and President of The NAAHBCU retired and election of new officers were held. A healthy transition of new administrative officers moved into important positions. Dr. Peggy Blood from Savannah State University was sworn in as the new President. This marks the first time that a woman will be leading this dynamic organization. In an effort to keep the organization vibrant, the organization will continue to seek creative ideas from a pool of talented members with a commitment and alliance to historically Black colleges and universities.



Front Row: Charmagne Minniffee, Bureau of Cultural Affairs Representative, Dr. Peggy Blood, (Savannah State Univ), Charnelle Holloway, (Spelman College), Marvette P. Aldrich, (Winston-Salem State Univ), Tina Dunkley, (Clark Atlanta Univ)

Back Row: Phillip R. Dotson, (LeMoyne-Owen College), William Anderson (Morehouse College), Hassan Kirkland, (Johnson C. Smith), Dr. Lee A. Ransaw, (Morris Brown College), E. Ashiene, (Clark Atlanta University), and Lamar Wilson, (Morris Brown College)

“Coming by Force: Overcoming by Choice” opening Gala at the APEX Museum in Atlanta, Ga.
During National Black Arts Festival, Summer 2006



NAAHBCU Executive Board Meeting, Dallas, Texas 2002



Front Row: Marvette P. Aldrich (Winston-Salem State), Johnnie Mae Maberry Gilbert (Tougaloo), Addie Dawson-Euba (Southern Univ.), *kneeling*-Phillip R. Dotson (LeMoyne-Owen), Fred Ajano (Morris Brown), Rev. Clarence Talley, Sr. (Prairie View A & M)

Back Row: Tewodross Melchishua (Bowie State), Desmond McFarlane (Alabama State) Dr. Herman Keith (Claflin) , Dr. Lee A. Ransaw (Morris Brown), Cleve Webber (Alabama State).