



GREATER PHILADELPHIA AREA DOCENT CONSORTIUM

GPADC Winter Meeting

African American Museum in Philadelphia

15 February 2022

Via Zoom

Welcome

GPADC Opening Remarks. GPADC Chair Anna Hadgis welcomed all participants to the GPADC Fall Meeting, presented in conjunction with the African American Museum in Philadelphia (AAMP). Anna announced the theme of our next meeting: *Crossroads: Interconnecting Cultures, Creating Community*. This theme expresses our mission as docents to create a welcoming environment for members of all cultures and to create bonds. The Crossroads meeting will be held at the Penn Museum on Tuesday, 19 April 2022. Hopefully, it will be a live event. Weather and pandemic restrictions permitting, we plan to have box lunches and the use of outdoor garden spaces.

Anna introduced Ivan Henderson, Vice President of Programming at AAMP. Ivan earned his undergraduate degree at Harvard and a Master's degree in Museum Studies at Bank Street College of Education. He previously oversaw three museums at the University of Delaware where he also taught undergraduate courses.

Program

Ivan Henderson, Vice President of Programming, AAMP. Ivan welcomed everyone to the AAMP and expressed his appreciation for their docents. He noted that the term "docent" comes from a Latin verb meaning "to teach." Ivan shared his thoughts on the importance of docents.

- Docents develop meaningful experiences for visitors.
- Docents are the first line of offense: the first to speak with tour groups and they make lasting impressions. They embody the mission of AAMP and form an important part of the institution along with staff, volunteers, members, advocates and patrons.
- Ivan strives to support docents' educational and professional development just as he does for paid staff.
- During the pandemic, AAMP docents adapted to changed conditions. They developed virtual tours and began a Book Club that includes members of the public.
- Docents initiated a collaboration with the Blackwell Branch of the Free Library of Philadelphia that helped AAMP to recruit new docents and brought new visitors.
- Docents provide continuity during staff changes.
- They challenge him on what will work, and they have contributed to his professional development.
- Ivan proudly displayed the "Museum Nerd" Tee shirt that he was wearing.
- Ivan ended by thanking docents for their knowledge and curiosity.

Ivan introduced our speaker, Dr. Brittany Webb, Evelyn and Will Kaplan Curator of Twentieth Century Art and the John Rhoden Collection at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts (PAFA). Dr. Webb was a curatorial intern at AAMP before she joined PAFA.

Dr. Brittany Webb, John Rhoden's *Nesaika* for the African American Museum in Philadelphia. Before she began her talk on Rhoden's sculpture, Dr. Webb noted that she had gone through docent training at AAMP when she worked there as a curatorial intern.

John Rhoden Biography. Rhoden was born in Birmingham, Alabama in 1916 and studied art with the noted sculptor Hale Woodruff, who remained one of his lifelong supporters. In 1936 Rhoden moved to New York City where he met many luminaries of the Harlem Renaissance, including Augusta Savage, Cab Calloway and Bill "Bojangles" Robinson. He also met Richmond Barthé, the most noted African American sculptor of the day, who became his mentor.

Rhoden was drafted in 1942 and taught sculpture to army personnel. He used his GI benefits to attend Columbia University in the 1950s where he won several sculpture prizes. He became the first Black artist in residence at the American Academy in Rome where his spacious studio allowed him to work on a larger scale. He was the first African American to win the Rome Prize and was also awarded a Rockefeller Fellowship. From 1955-1959, Rhoden participated in a worldwide tour of artists sponsored by the U.S. State Department. He visited twenty countries in the Americas, Africa, Europe and Asia and the influence of their artistic traditions can be seen in his work. He spent two years living in Indonesia.

After the tour, Rhoden returned to New York City. In 1966, he and his wife bought an 8,000 square foot home (a former garage) in Brooklyn. Here Rhoden created and exhibited his sculptures. Rhoden opened his home to the public: neighbors were welcome to visit, and his home was included on a walking tour of Brooklyn. He always made his work available to a wide variety of audiences. He and his wife taught at New York City public schools.

Rhoden's Public Sculpture Commissions. In 1956 Rhoden received his first large commission for the stairway of the Sheraton Inn in Society Hill, Philadelphia. Sadly, this work is no longer extant.

The Harlem Hospital commissioned *A Happy Family Is the Core of a Healthy Community* in 1965. This large bronze sculpture above the entrance shows a father, mother and child cradled in gigantic hands, signifying the hospital's mission to care for members of the community.

In 1976 AAMP (then known as the Afro-American Historical and Cultural Museum) commissioned Rhoden for *Nesaika*, a bronze sculpture to be placed outside their main entrance. The museum had just been conceived as part of Philadelphia's Bicentennial celebration and was the first African American museum commissioned by a major municipality. Its purpose was to recognize the contributions of African Americans to history and culture. Rhoden was chosen due to his fame for large, public works.

Nesaika stands 9 feet high and weighs 1400 pounds. Here we can see the influence of his travels with references to the traditions of Africa, Asia and the Americas. The figure is anthropomorphic yet abstract. The title, *Nesaika*, means "us" in a trading language used in the Northwest U.S. in earlier centuries. Rhoden felt a new language, visual as well as verbal, was necessary to express the diversity of modern peoples and what could be more appropriate than a word from a pidgin/trading language? This mirrors the way he combined visual references to multiple artistic traditions. Dr. Webb called this a neo-Africanist work, one that expresses the ideal of "out of many, one." It contains references to indigenous American works such as totem poles as well as Egyptian hieroglyphics. Rhoden said its upward thrusting form embodied peoples from the four corners of the world united in the great "now." Dr. Webb pointed to the way that this artistic syncretism reflected the experiences and

contributions of the African diaspora. Rhoden's signature can be found on the back of one of the legs. He created the sculpture with the lost wax method of bronze casting. An installation photograph shows Black workers installing a sculpture by a Black artist in front of a building that celebrates Black history and cultures and was designed by a Black architect. *Nesaika* was unveiled at the AAMP's grand opening in June 1976. An image of *Nesaika* also graced the cover of a catalogue of the 1982 exhibition of Rhoden's work at the AAMP.

Anna thanked Dr. Webb for her fascinating talk. Dr. Webb and Ivan Henderson supplied the additional information below in response to questions from the audience.

- Later in the 1970s, Rhoden created a sculpture of Frederick Douglass for Lincoln University in Philadelphia. She noted that Douglass was the most photographed individual of the 19th century.
- Rhoden's Brooklyn residence still stands at 23 Cranberry Street, but it is no longer open to the public as it has a new owner. There are other public Rhoden sculptures in New York and one at the Delaware Art Museum.
- Dr. Webb believes the large work in the Sheraton Inn stairway was destroyed.
- Rhoden usually used the same New York-based foundry for all his work.
- His wife was a pianist.
- This GPADC meeting was held virtually rather than on site, as originally planned, due to pandemic restrictions. An in-person event would have limited us to 25 participants.
- AAMP would be willing to discuss a collaboration with the Parkway Central Branch of the FLP.
- Dr. Webb discussed the important role played by gallerists in creating artistic fame. Rhoden never had a major gallerist to promote his work and to manage the administration of commissions and exhibitions. This lack was certainly influenced by his position as a Black artist in a White-dominated gallery system. However, Rhoden did achieve renown during his time, taking part in large exhibitions in major museums, receiving public commissions and selling his work.
- He and his wife had no children, but they did have siblings, nieces and nephews.
- Rhoden and his wife may have wanted their home to become a museum. Their executor, a family friend, realized that there was a great deal of interest in 20th Century African American art. He made an arrangement with PAFA whereby all the work from Rhoden's home would be given to PAFA, they would do a major exhibition and book, then keep some works and gift the rest to other major museums. In this way, Rhoden's work could be seen all over the country.
- Dr. Webb does not know if PAFA has the right to recast Rhoden's work but will find out.
- A recording of this GPADC meeting will be available on the GPADC website.
- Link to information on the lost wax process: <https://cantorfoundation.org/resources/the-lost-wax-casting-process/>
- Dr. Webb can be contacted at: bwebb@pafa.org.

Anna thanked Dr. Webb and noted that while Rhoden and his wife did not have children, they were lucky to have someone like her to study and promote the work. Dr. Webb is working on a book and exhibition of Rhoden's work scheduled for fall 2023. The book will have essays by five authors. Dr. Webb hopes to create walking tours that will include PAFA and AAMP.

Ivan praised Dr. Webb's presentation and told us that she had prepared training materials for docents when she was a curatorial intern at AAMP. Her comments on Rhoden's lack of fame and difficulties with the gallery system reminded him of Anna Russell Jones, who also did not have a gallerist. But work like Dr. Webb's will remedy this situation. We need to think about who is included and who is excluded and why.

Ivan then introduced Richard White, a long-standing docent at AAMP, whose passion for engagement has always impressed him. Richard was the docent who instigated the collaboration with the Blackwell branch of the FLP.

Richard White, Virtual Tour of the AAMP. Before leading participants on a virtual tour of the galleries, Richard shared his thoughts on docents and engagement.

- Docents and institutions are responsible for communicating historical narratives to our audiences. He said that *Crossroads: Interconnecting Cultures, Creating Community* aptly expresses what they do at AAMP.
- Richard emphasized the importance of being in a conversation with museum visitors.
- He compared the collaborations among administrators, staff and docents at a museum to a jazz composition. Individuals must stay true to the composition, but each “player” expresses and expands upon it.
- One of the main challenges of the AAMP and its docents is to make uncomfortable conversations comfortable for their visitors.
- AAMP’s mission is to make African American history resonate throughout the city of Philadelphia. As their collection is all by African Americans, they need to make it accessible to diverse audiences. They have a variety of strategies to accomplish this: use themes; focus on individual artists; and a core exhibit that focuses on community. They also try to have their docents forge connections with communities outside the museum, such as their collaboration with the FPL and their book clubs.
- Richard believes that docents at other institutions have an obligation to make the African American experience visible in their own collections.

Richard led us through the galleries of the museum.

The current exhibition is “Audacious Freedom: 1776 to 1876. A notable sculpture is *The Whispering Bells: A Tribute to Crispus Attucks* of 1976. It refers to the “whispering” about freedom of enslaved peoples.

The purpose in Gallery 1-A is to show the audience how the past influences the present. They do this by focusing on key themes: defining freedom, defining citizenship and building community. Here, as in other galleries, there are interactive kiosks. He noted that docent shadowing is part of their training process.

Morgan Lloyd, an AAMP Gallery Guide, said she liked to point out that Frederick Douglass and Harriet Tubman were abolitionists and therefore criminals. They were individuals actively working for citizenship. She also likes to emphasize that not all African Americans were enslaved. Some were self-emancipated; some were members of Afro-Indigenous groups.

Richard said Gallery 2 is where the uncomfortable becomes comfortable through conversations. This gallery includes life-size videos as well as interactive kiosks.

Galleries 3 and 4 currently have a Richard Watson exhibition. Richard noted that the architect had used ramps rather than stairs to ascend to the upper levels and thereby made the building accessible and recognized the diversity of its visitors.

Richard then showed several photographs in *Through His Eyes*, an exhibition of the photographer Jack Franklin that focuses on youth and activism. He pointed out a photograph taken at a protest at Girard College. Originally founded as a school for White boys, in the 1960s African Americans activists worked for integrating it. Another

image showed a Black Panther program with students. The section on “Protest and Sacrifice” showed images of young people being prepared for leadership.

Richard said that the docents at AAMP, like students, are always involved in learning. He stressed the importance of making connections with our communities and noted the value of docents to museums and to local, national and international communities.

Anna thanked Richard for his impressive virtual tour. She said although most of us are not young, we must stay current and recognize the importance of connectivity.

In response to questions, the AAMP staff provided the additional information below.

- Richard certainly sees a connection between the historical struggles for social justice and recent social issues. He tries to help audiences see that what happened in the past is now relevant and we need to have conversations about it.
- Ivan said that *Through His Eyes* was conceived by a curatorial intern, a woman who is now a public-school teacher in Baltimore. Ivan certainly saw the resonance between this exhibition and the Black Lives Matter movement.
- One participant said that as a docent of color at The Barnes Foundation, she makes it a point to discuss Albert Barnes’ connections to African and African American art and history. Barnes collected African as well as American and European art. Richard added that it is always important to ask about who is famous and why, regardless of the type of museum collection and whether one has a personal affinity with the objects or not.
- Richard said he encourages dialogues about difficult histories by identifying why the audience is there; by noting their body language and reactions; and by asking questions that will make them think.
- Richard stated that the AAMP docents are not diverse by ethnicity, but they are by age and gender. Morgan added that their docents, while all Black, each have their own intersectionality.

Closing

Anna again thanked Ivan Henderson, Brittany Webb, Richard White, Morgan Lloyd and Amber for a truly informative program. She cannot wait to take part in one of their tours.

Respectfully submitted, Rebecca Butterfield, Recording Secretary