Words of the Artists

"You say, 'In his personal life Mr. T. has had many things to contend with. Ill-health, poverty, and race prejudice.' . . . True—this condition has driven me out of the country and while I cannot sing our National Hymn . . . still deep down in my heart I love it and am sometimes sad that I cannot live where my heart is." **—Henry Ossawa Tanner**, 1914 [i]

"More often than not, the painting tells me what it is going to be." **—Charles H. Alston** [ii]

"I have always wanted my art to service my people—to reflect us, to relate to us, to stimulate us, to make us aware of our potential." **—Elizabeth Catlett** [iii]

"[My goal is] to reveal through pictorial complexities the riches of a life I know. I do not need to go looking for 'happenings,' the absurd, or the surreal because I have seen things that neither Dali, Beckett, Ionesco, nor any of the others could have thought possible; and to see these things, I did not need to do more than look out of my studio window." **—Romare Bearden** [iv]

"It is the small but critical tasks of daily life that I find most stimulating and reflective of the quality of essential personal values." **—Jonathan Green** [v]

[i] Smithsonian Institution, Archives of American Art, "The Papers of African American Artists, Henry Ossawa Tanner (1859–1937)," http://www.aaa.si.edu/guides/pastguides/afriamer/tanner.htm (accessed Feb. 19, 2008).

[ii] Romare Bearden and Harry Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists from 1792 to the Present* (New York: Pantheon Press, 1993), 269.

[iii] Samella Lewis, *Art: African American* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978).

[iv] Michael Kimmelman, "Life's Abundance, Captured in Collage," *New York Times*, Oct. 15, 2004.

[v] Jonathan Green commenting on his work in a photo essay, *Now with Bill Moyers*, PBS, Jan. 24, 2003, see: http://www.pbs.org/now/arts/greenessay.html (accessed Feb. 19, 2008).

Cover: **Romare Bearden**, *Jamming at the Savoy*, ca. 1988, lithograph, 22" x 30" © Romare Bearden Foundation/Licensed by VAGA, New York, New York

The Essayist

Suzanne Charlé is a writer and editor living in New York. She has served as an editor for a number of publications, including *The New York Times*, *House Beautiful*, and *New York Magazine*. Her articles on culture and the arts have appeared in those publications, as well as *The Nation*, *American Prospect*, *The International Herald Tribune*, and *The San Francisco Chronicle*. She is author of several books, including *Bali*, *Island of Grace* (Hong Kong: Passport Books, 1991), a cultural guide. Ms. Charlé has also worked as writer and producer on several film projects, including the documentary accompanying this exhibition.

[1] *The Art Newspaper*, Readers' Questions, December 2004 (http://www.saatchi-gallery.co.uk/charlesqa/qa.htm).

[2] Interviews with Vivian Hewitt by the author, New York City, November and December 2007, January 2008. All of Mrs. Hewitt's quotes come from these interviews.

[3] Phone interviews with J. Eugene Grigsby by the author, November and December 2007, January 2008. All of Dr. Grigsby's quotes come from these interviews.

[4] Barbara Lewis, *Ernest Crichlow*, unpublished paper, n.d., 4, Hewitt Archival Papers.

[5] Michael Kimmelman, "An Appreciation," *The New York Times*, June 14, 2000.

[6] Interviews with June Kelly by the author, December 2007 and January 2008. All of Ms. Kelly's quotes come from these interviews.

[7] Interviews with Corinne Jennings by the author, December 2007 and January 2008.

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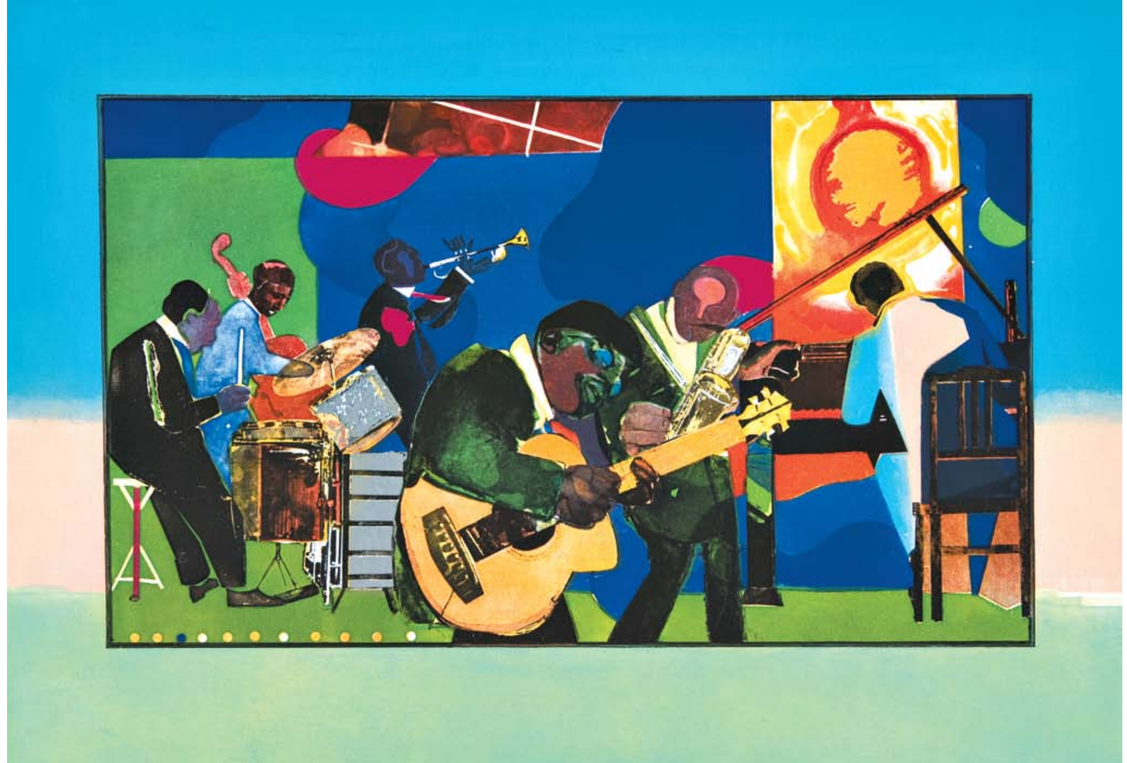
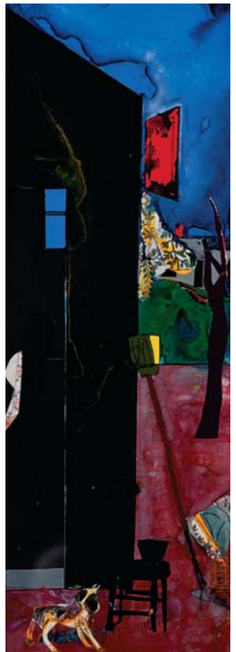
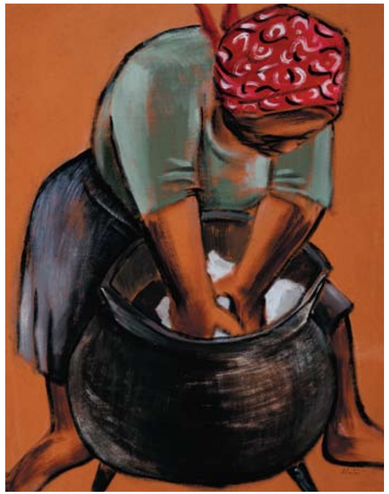


THE HEWITT COLLECTION OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN ART

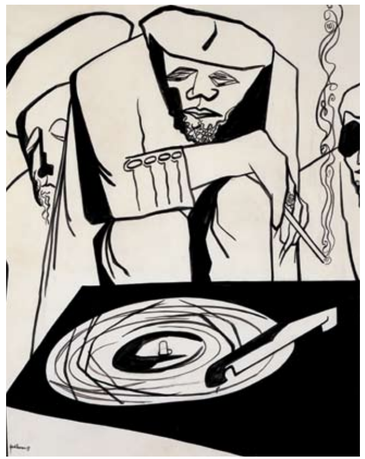


Romare Bearden, *Morning Ritual*, 1986, collage with acrylic on plywood, 20" x 6¾" © Romare Bearden Foundation/ Licensed by VAGA, New York, New York.



Charles H. Alston, *Woman Washing Clothes*, ca. 1970, oil pastel on paper, 30½" x 20½" © 2008 Estate of Charles Alston. Courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, LLC, New York, New York.

Ronald Joseph, *The Family*, ca. 1953, mixed media on paper, 23¾" x 18⅛" © Ronald Joseph.



Jacob Lawrence, *Playing Records*, 1949, India ink on paper, 23" x 18" © 2008 The Jacob and Gwendolyn Knight Lawrence Foundation, Seattle/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

"If you don't enjoy making your own decisions, you will never be much of a collector."
– **Charles Saatchi**, advertising executive, art collector, and owner of Saatchi Gallery, London.[1]

By Charles Saatchi's definition, John and Vivian Hewitt were very happy and very good collectors. Over more than a half a century, the New York couple visited galleries, artists' studios, and exhibitions, collecting hundreds of paintings, etchings, and sketches. The result of their shared enthusiasm is the Hewitt Collection of African-American Art, an assemblage of fifty-eight works that celebrates the expression and passion of twenty artists, including Romare Bearden, Margaret Burroughs, Jonathan Green, Jacob Lawrence, and Henry Ossawa Tanner.

The Hewitts' means were modest (she was a librarian, he a medical journalist and freelance writer), but their vision was exceptional: to create a space for art in their home and in their community. "It has been a grand adventure," says Mrs. Hewitt.[2] The adventure started in 1949, on the Hewitts' honeymoon. "Instead of spending money from our wedding on furniture, we spent it on art. We went to the Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney, the Metropolitan Museum. And we bought fine prints. I still have them!" Valentine's Day, Mother's Day, Father's Day, birthdays, and Christmas were celebrated with the purchase of art. "John and I would go to exhibitions, and I'd set out one way and he'd set out the other," recalls Mrs. Hewitt. "Nine times out of ten, we'd end up choosing the same painting—for different reasons." Mrs. Hewitt was drawn to Charles H. Alston's *Woman Washing Clothes* (page 11) because, as she says, "it reminded me of summers at my granddad's farm in North Carolina in the 1920s. My grandmother and my aunts would wash clothes in a pot like that. Later, in the 30s, my mother would cook up applesauce in the fall in a pot—I could just smell it!" John, her late husband, liked it "because it reminded him of the first time he came to my family reunion in North Carolina, and my cousins were using the pot to deep-fry fish."

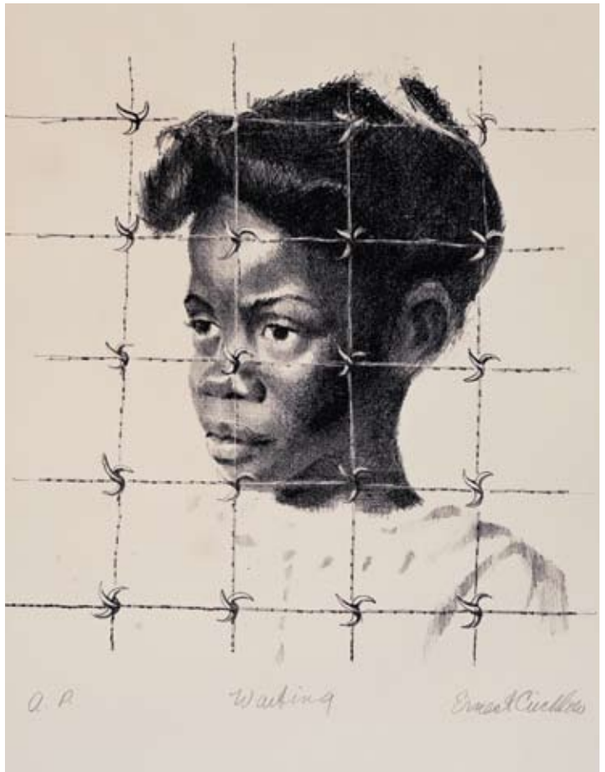
Collecting was a learning process, and the Hewitts had impressive tutors. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, John's sister, Adele Glascow, ran a gallery in Harlem. "We met many artists and Harlem society there—Ernest Crichlow, Langston Hughes read *Weary Blues,* Randy Weston played with his quintet," Mrs.Hewitt says. "We were living with history and culture." John Biggers, muralist and professor of art at Texas Southern University, was one of Mrs. Hewitt's many relatives. Their most important guide was a cousin of Mrs. Hewitt, J. Eugene

Hale A. Woodruff, *The Card Players*, 1978, oil on canvas, 36" x 42¼" © 2008 Estate of Hale Woodruff/Elnora, Inc. Courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, LLC, New York, New York.

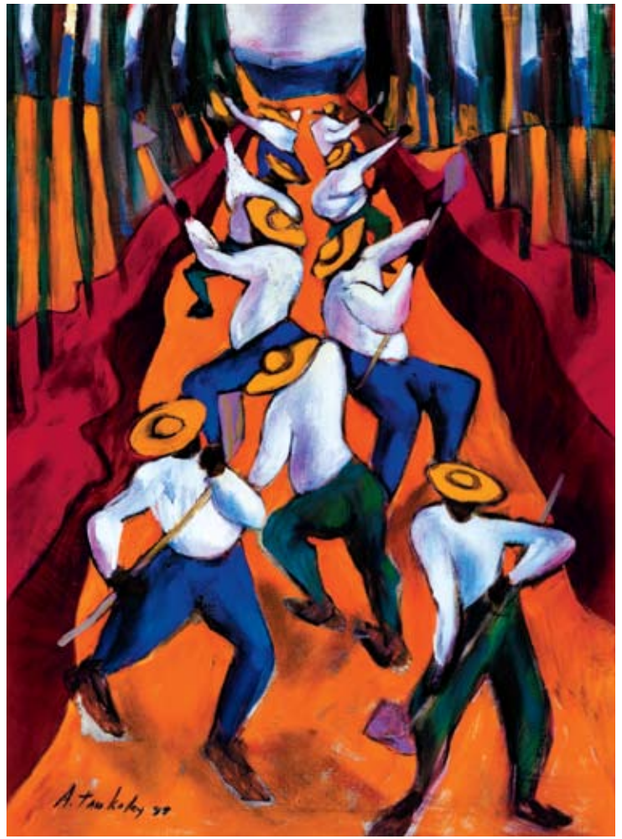
J. Eugene Grigbsy, *Abstraction in Red and Black*,
ca. 1963 oil on canvas, 26" x 34"
© 2008 J. Eugene Grigsby.

Grigsby. Grigsby had studied art under Hale Woodruff at Morehouse College in Atlanta and, years later, in pursuit of his Ph.D, Grigsby followed Woodruff to New York University. In fact, a work by Grigsby was the first African-American art that the young couple bought: to help pay for art school, the aspiring artist incorporated himself and sold "shares" to family and friends and paid "dividends"—a print for fifteen dollars, a painting for twenty-five.

Grigsby first arrived in New York in 1938 with $125 in his pocket, to study at the American Artists School. The cultural life in Harlem was vibrant. "My first day, I checked into the Harlem YMCA Annex and then went to the art gallery in the main building," Grigsby recalls. "There was one person there. I introduced myself: 'I'm Eugene Grigsby from Charlotte, North Carolina, and I'm studying art.' 'I'm Jake Lawrence.' It was Lawrence's exhibition. 'I'll introduce you around.'"[3] Soon Grigsby was part of the Harlem art scene, which included Romare Bearden, Ernest Crichlow, and Jacob Lawrence. All of them frequently gathered at Charles "Spinky" Alston's studio (known as 360) to discuss art and politics.



Ernest Crichlow, *Waiting*, ca. 1965
lithograph, 19½" x 14"
© Ernest Crichlow.



Ann Tanksley, *Canal Builders II*, 1989,
oil on linen, 36" x 25½"
© 2008 Ann Tanksley.

In the harsh years of the Great Depression, the Works Progress Administration (WPA) hired thousands of artists to work on projects. Although Grigsby was too young to be hired, many black artists were employed, including Alston, Crichlow, Lawrence, Ronald Joseph, and Hughie Lee-Smith. "The WPA was our haven, and offered us a real entrée into what was happening," Crichlow recalled. "We had a lot of hope."[4] Alston was the first African-American to supervise work on a major mural, *Magic and Medicine,* for the Harlem Hospital. Lawrence created a series celebrating Frederick Douglass and Harriet Tubman, whose resistance to slavery opened paths of opportunity for millions.

In 1940 and 1941, the young Lawrence painted the sixty-panel *Migration of the Negro* series, part of which was published by *Forbes* magazine; later, the Museum of Modern Art bought half of the *Migration* series, and the Phillips Collection purchased the other half. At the end of the decade, Lawrence illustrated Langston Hughes' book of poems honoring the migration, *One Way Ticket*. (Years later, Mr. Hewitt's sister, who worked with Hughes, gave the Hewitts one of Lawrence's illustrations that was not included in the book, *Playing Records*, page 12.) Mrs. Hewitt notes that fame came early to "Jake" Lawrence—and also to Bearden, whose work was shown in group exhibitions at the Whitney and Metropolitan museums in 1951 and in a one-man show at the Museum of Modern Art in 1971. Most of their peers, however, were overlooked. Few mainstream galleries showed the works of African-American artists, and those that did had trouble selling them. In 2000, just before his death, Lawrence recalled that when he was young and going to art galleries in New York, "no one would keep you out, but it wasn't hospitable. You knew you were being watched."[5]

In the 1960s, the Hewitts decided to focus on collecting African-American art. By the late 1970s, they were hosting exhibitions for their artist-friends. The couple had bought a brownstone on the Upper West Side and had converted two stories into a dramatic living space, specially designed to accommodate all their art and books. The artist Alvin C. Hollingsworth thought it a perfect spot to exhibit his art and set out to convince the Hewitts. Finally, Mrs. Hewitt reluctantly agreed. "Al could sell icicles to an Eskimo!" she says now, allowing that it was a very good idea: "It was an educational process for our friends; many black professionals were just starting to be interested in art. We invited them, so they could meet the artists in comfortable surroundings and learn about art and about seeing." Their friends also bought. After the exhibition, Hollingsworth told the Hewitts that he sold more paintings on one Sunday afternoon than his dealer did in an entire year.

"Their house was a salon," notes June Kelly, a New York gallery owner who was introduced to the Hewitts by Bearden. "The only thing I can compare it to is Gertrude Stein's salon in Paris—everyone was there: artists, literati, doctors, educators, politicians."[6]

The success spurred the Hewitts to open their home to other artists in the 1980s. While money was fine, the real reward for the artists was recognition—a sense of validation. "It was the first time I really sold many paintings and thought of myself as an artist," says Grigsby, who left New York to teach art in Phoenix, first in a segregated high school and later at Arizona State University. (Grigsby's highly successful career has brought him numerous awards, including, most recently, one from the Congressional Black Caucus Spouses.) As a result of another exhibition at the Hewitts', an aging Crichlow, who had all but stopped painting, received a commission from Ciba-Geigy to paint portraits of renowned African-American scientists.

The Hewitt Collection of African-American Art offers a very personal and diverse view of the African-American art community and the larger society in which the artists worked, a view largely unseen by white Americans in the 1980s. "You have to realize that most African-Americans weren't shown in mainstream museums and galleries," says Corinne Jennings, an art historian who, with her artist husband, Joe Overstreet, opened Kenkeleba Gallery, on New York's Lower East Side, in 1979.[7] The importance of community is evident in the works in the Hewitt Collection; most are figurative, and many focus on family and life in the community. Only a few are abstract, notably Grigsby's *Abstraction in Red and Black* (page 4) and *Black, Brown, and Beige*, a tribute to Duke Ellington's jazz suite. "This is art we lived with," Mrs. Hewitt explains. "We wanted it to be beautiful, inspiring, welcoming." Nonetheless, some of the works detail grim realities: *No Vacancy*, Grigsby's painful record of cross-country trips he made with his wife in the 1960s; *Waiting*, Crichlow's haunting Civil Rights–era lithograph of a young girl behind barbed wire (page 5); and Ann Tanksley's *Canal Builders II*, which is based on tales from a relative of the artist who worked on the Panama Canal (page 6).

Faced with American racism, some African-American artists elected to become expatriates. Henry Ossawa Tanner, who moved to Paris in the 1890s, came to be the first African-American artist to be recognized on both sides of the Atlantic. In the late 1940s Elizabeth Catlett took up residence in Mexico, where she met Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo, although she now also resides part-time in New York. Others were permanently estranged. Ronald Joseph, who moved to Belgium, was later "rediscovered" by Ann Gibson, a Yale professor. Gibson brought Joseph's paintings to New York and master printmaker Bob Blackburn sold them to collectors. "We bought three—they'd been sitting under Joseph's bed and were very expensive to restore [page 12]," Mrs. Hewitt notes. With the money, Gibson and Blackburn brought Joseph to New York. "He'd been away since 1956—and on his return visit to the U.S., he felt as if there was no place for him. I think it was an awesome and frightening experience for him."

Slowly, however, Mrs. Hewitt states, "there was growth of recognition of African-American artists." The first recognition was within their own community: "One year, in *Black Enterprise*'s year-end issue devoted to art, the publisher encouraged black professionals to invest in their heritage—invest in art!" She adds: "I think the turning point for the white community was in the 1970s, when Michael Kimmelman wrote a long essay on the history of black art in the *New York Times*. Essentially he said: 'It's here to stay, you'd better get on the bandwagon.'"

John and Vivian Hewitt. Courtesy of the Hewitt Archives.

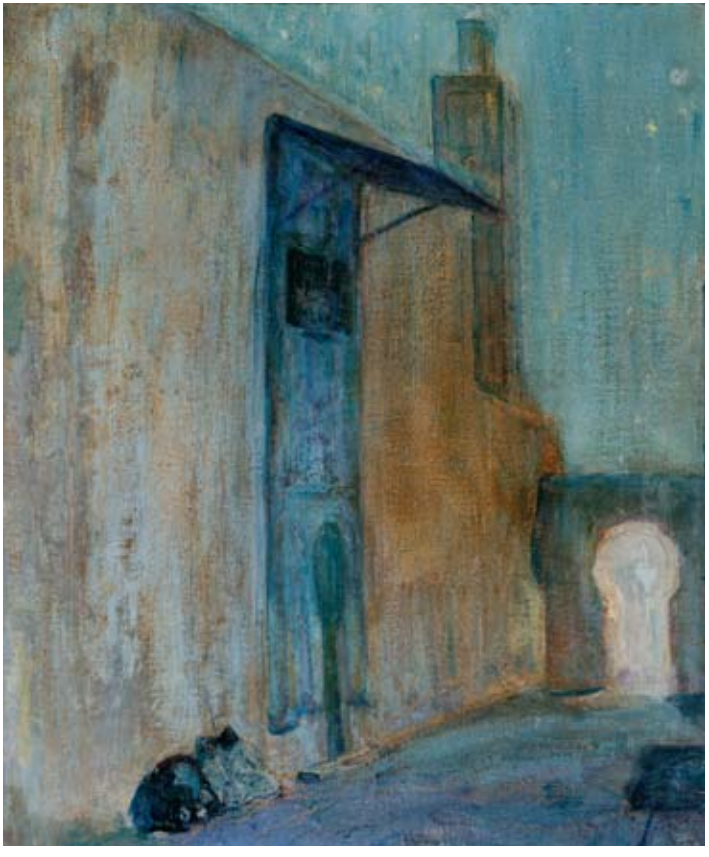
"It's not an easy life, being an artist," Mrs. Hewitt comments. "But it's easier now for black artists." She points to Jonathan Green, a young artist the Hewitts "adopted," who now "sells his paintings before they're off his easel."

Mrs. Hewitt stresses that she and her husband never bought art as an investment (indeed, one time, Mrs. Hewitt took out a loan to buy Tanner's *Gate in Tangiers*, page 10.) But as John Hewitt's health began to fail, the couple had to make plans for the future of much of their art. "We wanted to keep it as a collection, to be used as an educational tool. That's why, when we were approached by NationsBank (now Bank of America), it was a match made in heaven." The bank purchased fifty-eight works and put them on tour. At the end of the tour, the bank will donate the collection to the Harvey B. Gant Center for African-American Arts and Culture in Charlotte, North Carolina, where it will be permanently displayed. "Thousands of people have seen these artists' works," says Mrs. Hewitt. "And when the collection goes to its home, even more will have a chance."

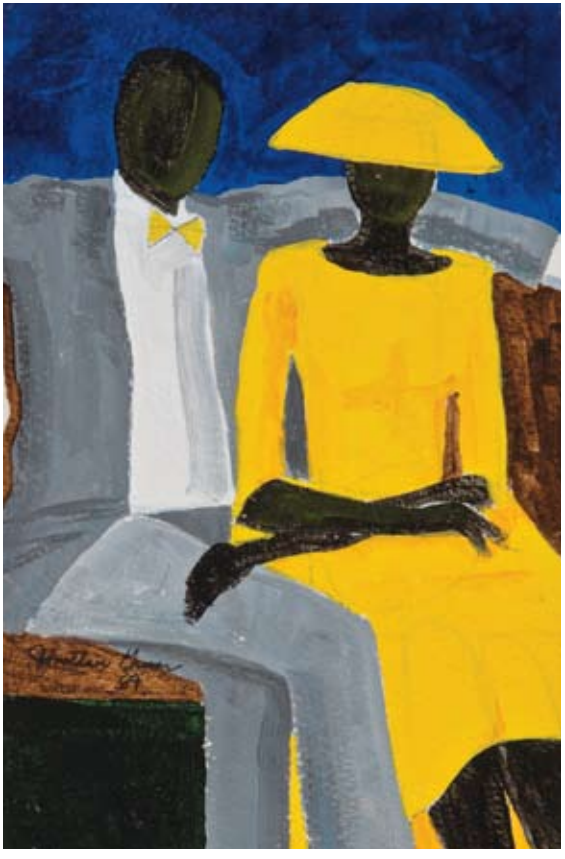
Says art dealer June Kelly, "When I think of the Hewitt Collection, I think of it as the hallmark of the beginning of the appreciation for African-American artists, as educating future generations to see and look and know their legacy."

Mrs. Hewitt, in her typically generous spirit, shrugs at the notion that what she and her husband did was extraordinary. "Anyone can collect," she says. "You don't have to be wealthy. When I go out on lectures, I encourage people to buy art locally, to support the artists in their own neighborhoods. What is important—that you love the art. That you take it into your home and make it part of your life."

—Suzanne Charlé



Henry Ossawa Tanner, *Gate in Tangiers*, ca. 1910
oil on canvas, 18¼" x 15".



Jonathan Green, *Easter*, 1989,
acrylic on paper, 11¼" x 7½"
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