

## A Quietly Subversive Display of Black Power

By Michael O'Sullivan  
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There's a tiny new museum on 14th Street NW.

That's what it looks like anyway, at Hemphill Fine Arts, where "Selections From the Barnett-Aden Collection: A Homecoming Celebration" is on view. The art on the walls -- by Jacob Lawrence, Romare Bearden, John N. Robinson, Aaron Douglas, Alma Thomas, Henry O. Tanner, Elizabeth Catlett, John Biggers and others -- makes for a virtual who's who of 20th-century black art. None of it is for sale. Yet this contemporary commercial gallery setting really does feel like a homecoming.



That's because, despite the museum-caliber work on view, the show has its roots in another commercial Washington gallery. Albeit one that many have never heard of.

Founded in 1943 in a private home in Northeast Washington, the now-defunct Barnett-Aden Gallery was a collaboration between the late James Herring, a Howard University professor of art, and the late Alonzo Aden, a student of Herring's and curator of the school's art gallery. It was named after Naomi Barnett-Aden, Alonzo's mother and the owner of the house at 127 Randolph St. At a time of widespread segregation, the gallery gave a home to African American artists, many of whom could not exhibit elsewhere.

Even if you don't recognize their names, their art may look familiar. The works are modest in scale and somewhat conservative in style. Many are portraits (including ones of Herring and Aden); some are urban landscapes; a handful are the gentlest of abstractions, ready for the living-room wall. The bright, bold Afrocentric colors and tribal-cloth patterns that some associate with African American painting? That's another show, another time.

Also, other tastes. The pictures here (for this is mostly a picture show, despite a few sculptures) would not be out of place on the walls of the Phillips Collection. That's what Herring and Aden liked.

Selected by curator Jeffrey Stewart from a collection of about 250 pieces, the 33 works in the show are not a historical survey. Yes, they stretch over about a century. The oldest is an 1879 landscape by Edward Mitchell Bannister; the newest, Herring's 1970 portrait by Frederick Campbell. But the bulk of the show (25 works) dates from the 1930s to the 1950s.

There may not seem to be anything radical about the art at Hemphill, but there is, in fact, something quietly subversive about the preponderance of portraits and figures. As Stewart explains it, the '30s, '40s and '50s -- decades leading up to what would only later become known as the civil rights era -- were not just times of rising self-confidence in the black community but of black *self-consciousness*.

There is, then, a sense of communal reflection in these pictures of brown-skinned people. A sense of looking in the mirror. That's nowhere better seen than in Robinson's "Self-Portrait as a Young Man With a Mirror," from around 1940. In that picture, the artist's palette can be seen in the background, and it looms, with a sense of not just artistic promise but also political power.

The civil rights movement -- and all the blood, sweat and tears it would entail -- had not yet taken hold of this country. But Stewart asks rhetorically: If you were a black artist in the 1940s, longing to be seen, "what are you going to do? Stand around and wait?"

Painting your own picture -- better yet, building a place to hang it -- was a call to action.

*Selections From the Barnett-Aden Collection: A Homecoming Celebration Through March 7 at Hemphill Fine Arts, 1515 14th St. NW (Metro: Dupont Circle) Contact: 202-234-5601.*

<http://www.hemphillfinearts.com>. *Hours:* Open Tuesday-Sunday from 10 to 5. *Admission:* Free. *Public program:* On March 7 at 10 a.m., the gallery will present a free panel discussion on the exhibition.

Photo Credit: "Little Brown Girl," circa 1940, by Laura Wheeler Waring in "Selections From the Barnett-Aden Collection." (Photos By Peter Harholdt)

[http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/02/05/AR2009020500869\\_pf.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/02/05/AR2009020500869_pf.html)

## The Story Behind The Collection

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Born in Washington, the Barnett-Aden Collection hasn't been seen in this city since 1974, when, after the dissolution of the Barnett-Aden Gallery, the art was featured in an exhibition at the Smithsonian's Anacostia Neighborhood Museum.

After that, the collection was put up for sale in pieces, according to curator Jeffrey Stewart, who writes of the works being "dispersed among several owners in a series of transactions that remain a mystery." In 1989, much of it wound up in the hands of the Florida Education Fund, with plans to showcase it in its National Museum of African American Art. But the museum soon hit upon hard times and in 1998 was put up for sale, along with its contents.

Enter art collector and Black Entertainment Television founder Robert L. Johnson, who bought it all for an undisclosed price. During the past decade, the businessman has been restoring much of the private collection, which, if this handsome sampling is any indication, has almost certainly appreciated several times over since then.

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