SYMPHONIC POEM: A CASE STUDY IN MUSEUM EDUCATION

DISSERTATION

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By

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ABSTRACT

In this case study, I examine the extraordinary work of contemporary artist Aminah Brenda Lynn Robinson and the intersection of my experience as an educator serving as a co-curator for *Symphonic Poem*, a major retrospective exhibition of her work in 2003. The case study is a vehicle to examine the role of museum educators in developing and presenting exhibitions that empower visitors to discover their own meaning in Aminah’s complex and layered work. In presenting the case study of the exhibition, I probe the rich artistic vocabulary of the artist and scrutinize response to it through a survey which 100 visitors completed as well as through poetry written by adults and by children in the exhibition. I examine these responses in light of the desired goals and outcomes my co-curator and I had established for the exhibition.

My examination of the case and my research related to it highlight the challenges and opportunities that face museum educators and all museum workers in an era when museums are examining their relevancy as they compete with all types of cultural and commercial events and venues for people’s time and attention. This collaboration between a curator of contemporary art and an educator provides an alternative approach to traditional museum practices and organizational structures and raises important questions concerning the training and practice of museum professionals.
In addition to examining the role of museum educators in exhibitions, I present strategies to encourage K-12 students and visitors of all ages to critically confront issues of identity, race, and oppression that hover just below the rich patterns and button-encrusted surface of Aminah’s work. In the world she has created, being black is the norm, but everyone is invited to participate by sharing their memories, stories, and dreams. Art like that of Aminah Robinson helps to fill in the gaps that the modern museum created in regard to marginalizing and ignoring the voices of women and minorities. Educators in the post-museum can become border-crossers themselves in creating exhibitions, linking them with a broad range of communities, and encouraging visitors to become border-crossers as well.
To Nelson, who has always encouraged me in all my endeavors, and to our children and granddaughter, who are my inspiration:

Lindsay,

Tracy and Scott,

Ben, Alyssa, and Sophie Anne

In memory of Sally and Phil Miller and

Anne Genshaft
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I have been privileged to work at the Columbus Museum of Art since 1984. For more than twenty years, my “work” has been to connect the public with every
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

“The works are communal and therefore, they do not belong to one person. They belong to the community and to the future of the community.”

Aminah Brenda Lynn Robinson
(personal communication, March 24, 2003)

In this case study, I examine the juncture of the work of contemporary artist Aminah Brenda Lynn Robinson (b. 1940) (see Figure 1) with its representation in a museum setting from my perspective as a museum educator and co-curator of the artist’s retrospective exhibition, *Symphonic Poem.*¹ My research examines the life of Aminah² and issues of gender and race in the artist’s work through the lens of insider/outsider theory, critical race theory, and feminist theory. I describe the development and presentation of the exhibition as well as the role of museum educators in developing and presenting exhibitions. I include visitor response to the exhibition as part of my investigation. My research is timely as museums, museum educators, and communities today are constantly questioning their relevancy and seeking ways to increase their value to their communities. (Anderson, 2006; Henry, 2006). My goal is to gain new perspectives on museum education. An increased role for museum educators in

¹ *Symphonic Poem: The Art of Aminah Brenda Lynn Robinson,* Columbus Museum of Art, December 13, 2002-March 20, 2003, was co-curated by Carole M. Genshaft and Annegreth Nill. The national tour of the exhibition was curated by Carole Genshaft and traveled to the Brooklyn Art Museum (February 23, 2006); Tacoma Art Museum (September 16, 2006 – January 28, 2007) and to the Toledo Museum of Art (February 23 – May 20, 2007).
² I use the artist’s first name because she prefers it and to indicate my close relationship with her.
exhibitions has the potential to increase museum/visitor connections with the purpose of making the art museum relevant and meaningful to the lives of an ever-expanding public.

Case Study Chapters

This introductory chapter includes my research questions, purpose and need for doing this work, fundamental premises, methodology, my own subjectivity, theoretical groundings, a timeline of the study, and a summary. In the second chapter, to ground my work and provide a larger context for this case study, I review the history of museums as educational institutions and examine issues concerning the relevancy and value of museums today. In Chapter 3, I present a detailed portrait of Aminah Robinson based on interviews I conducted with the artist and an examination of her life and work through the lens of critical race theory, insider/outsider theory, and feminist theory. Chapter 4 is an overview of the development and presentation of *Symphonic Poem*, the retrospective exhibition of Aminah’s work. I focus on the educational components of this community-based exhibition, insider/outsider issues, and an analysis of visitor response.

In Chapter 5, I explore the relationship between museum educators and exhibitions. In order to ground my own experience, I surveyed museum educators throughout the country in regard to their involvement in museum exhibitions. In the final chapter, I summarize the previous chapters, consider implications from the case study for the future of museum education, and recommend topics for further research. In particular, I discuss Aminah’s work as a vehicle of social reconstruction through civic dialogue that critically examines racism, sexism, classism, and other forms of oppression and “othering.” While Aminah’s work is layered with color, pattern, and texture, it is also layered with levels of semiotic meaning. At one level, it presents a joyful, celebratory
account of community and family life and on another, it seeks to rectify generations of historical and social omissions that have obscured the roles of Africans, African Americans, women, and those who are economically disadvantaged.

Research Questions

The first group of questions, which I discuss as part of the contextual information in Chapter 2, deals with the history of museums as educational institutions and the paradigm shift from object-centered to visitor and community-centered museums. Why has the shift occurred? What does it mean for museum education and the role of educators? I also examine the politics of representation regarding the selection and presentation of exhibitions. How is the subject of an exhibition determined? Who can speak for the artist or group of artists? What objects are selected and which ones are omitted? How do insider/outsider roles change and affect exhibition development? In looking at these questions, I build my examination on issues and examples presented in *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display* (Karp & Lavine, Eds., 1991) and I relate these issues to the development and presentation of *Symphonic Poem*.

The second area of research I address in this case study is an in-depth portrait of Aminah Brenda Lynn Robinson, based on interviews, conversations, written material, and her artwork. For eight months, I interviewed the artist and carefully recorded her detailed stories. In examining these stories, I present themes and key concepts that permeate her work and discuss them in light of black feminism and critical race theory.

In the third area of inquiry, I examine the *Symphonic Poem* exhibition and visitors’ responses to it. I consider insider/outsider aspects of the relationship between myself as researcher and the artist as the subject of the research. In regard to visitor
response, I am interested in determining if visitors connected the exhibition to their own experiences and knowledge, and if so, in what ways. This type of inquiry into the meaning visitors make of the exhibition is consistent with the approach of a constructivist museum, one in which visitors are encouraged to construct their own realities (Hooper-Greenhill, Ed., 1995). Because African Americans are the subject of almost the entire exhibition, I am interested in determining whether there are patterns of responses to the exhibition based on the race and gender of the visitor. As another means of examining visitor response, I will present poems written by adults and children who visited the exhibition.

The fourth group of questions regards the relationship of museum educators and exhibitions. Are educators involved in exhibition planning and presentation? Should educators be involved at the earliest stages of exhibition development? At what point are educators involved? What is their role? Do they have enough time and staff support to do their job well? What effects, if any, are there when an educator serves as a curator? How did my involvement as a curator in *Symphonic Poem* affect the presentation of the exhibition? In order to begin answering these questions, I examine the Denver Art Museum’s model of exhibition development in which a curator and educator organize exhibitions together. In order to ground my own experience and compare and contrast it with others, I surveyed educators in museums across the country to ascertain their roles in developing and presenting exhibitions.

After this examination of the history of museum education, the politics of exhibition, a portrait of the artist, an overview of the exhibition and visitor response to it, and the relationship of museum educators and exhibitions, I discuss implications gleaned...
from the study and ideas for further study. What might the future look like for museum workers who share the goal of making their museums as relevant as possible to their constituencies?

Purpose and Need

As museums seek to be relevant to the communities they serve, they look for balance between maintaining their authority and expertise and encouraging the participation of many voices representing diverse perspectives. The case study provides an example of one museum’s practice that will be of use to other practitioners and to those entering the field. Museum professionals need to share their stories concerning community involvement so that colleagues can benefit from them.

While there is little debate among museum professionals in regard to the educational mission of museums, there often exists a reluctance to share the responsibility across various departments in regard to exhibitions (Zeller, 1989). In the past, many curators have favored “clean hangs” in which the object “speaks for itself” with little or no interpretive material (Chew, 2005). The roles of educators in exhibitions are not delineated in any national standards or professional guidelines. In order to place my own experience in a larger context, I surveyed a sampling of educators at art museums throughout the country to determine the extent of their involvement in exhibition planning, design, and presentation. An analysis of this data provides a general overview of the relationship of museum educators and exhibitions. One of my goals in surveying museum educators is to determine whether or not they feel they have the opportunity and support to best serve the public in regard to exhibitions. Exhibitions are, in reality, museums’ most important education programs.
One way of determining the value of Symphonic Poem is to examine the visitor experience and determine whether or not visitors found personal meaning in the exhibition. The survey I developed asked visitors whether or not they related the exhibition to their own experiences and stories, whether or not they gained new information, and which educational components of the exhibition they found most useful. The information gained from the visitor surveys have informed my own practice as an educator and will contribute to better understanding the visitor experience for other museum workers. I also discuss examples of poetry created by several poets, spoken word performance artists, and elementary students in response to the exhibition. My purpose in examining visitor response in these ways is to determine whether or not the exhibition is relevant to those who have seen it, and if so, how could it be even more relevant. Relevancy and value to the public is a crucial issue confronting museums today (Anderson, 2006).

In her dissertation, art educator Susan Myers (1996) analyzed and interpreted responses to the work of Aminah Robinson by a carefully selected group of people who either knew Aminah, her work, her subject matter, or who were art educators. Her work informs multicultural education and demonstrates how multiple views of Aminah’s work “can be used to construct meaning and value from art work” (Myers, p. iii). I also examine responses to Aminah’s work, but focus on a specific museum exhibition of Aminah’s work and on the response of random visitors to the exhibition. Both Myers’ research and aspects of mine consider possibilities for “using” Aminah’s work to encourage meaning-making by those who encounter it.
Fundamental Premises

The first premise that grounds my work is the belief that art serves society by providing a means of communication in which human beings connect with themselves, with each other, with their own communities and cultures, and with those communities and cultures other than their own. Art also serves society by enabling individuals and communities to remember or learn about their own pasts and those of others. It is socially valuable when it transforms what people think and/or brings about positive change in regard to issues such as race, gender, politics, and the environment. Art brings value to society by providing human beings with spiritual, aesthetic, and emotional pleasures.

In the long term, the viability of museums depends on visitor participation. In order for art museums to be relevant to the communities they serve, museums must help the public connect with art. In order for visitors to participate, they must be able to connect the museum to their own life experiences (G. E. Hein, 2006). For the last twenty years, museum researchers and scholars (G. E. Hein, 1998; Roberts, Hooper-Greenhill, 1999; Roberts, 1997) have demonstrated the need for museums to practice constructivism. G. E. Hein (1998) defines constructivism as having two components. The first is learning which requires the active participation of the learner and second that the learner’s validity of conclusions or the meaning he or she makes depends on the reality of the learner and not on some external, generally accepted “truth.” Museum educators are in pivotal position to encourage a constructivist museum environment through the programs and materials they develop and present. Visitors to museums are more likely to connect with the art when they feel empowered to consider it based on
their own experiences and knowledge. This is not something that comes naturally to everyone. My recent experience of teaching an introductory contemporary art course to non-arts undergraduates demonstrated the importance of making people comfortable. At the beginning of the class, most of the students expressed their reluctance to discuss art because they were not “experts.” Many of the students, who had never been to a museum or who had never taken a studio art or art history course, did not feel they had a “right” to comment on the art or relate it to their own lives. During the quarter, they completed a number of exercises and assignments requiring them to describe, interpret, and judge examples of contemporary art. I encouraged them to relate the art to their own experiences. As a result of these exercises, the students were able to relate to art in a way they had never considered previously. Many of them expressed a newfound confidence in discussing their chosen work of art and a general “awakening” to its relevance in their lives. Through education materials and programs, museum educators can encourage visitors to make these kinds of connections. If museums are to flourish, the public must be able to connect the collections, exhibitions, and programs with their own lives in meaningful ways.

Another premise that guides my work is that diversity in staffs, exhibitions, programs, and audiences is essential for the survival and success of museums. As a public educational institution, the museum is in a unique position to serve as a forum in which people of all backgrounds can learn through art about their own cultures, religions, and histories and those of others. Serving diverse audiences benefits all visitors.

Perhaps the most important premise that guides my work is the conviction that art is fundamentally important to human beings. Making art and making meaning of art
afford people of all ages and backgrounds unique opportunities to be creative, to be reflective, and to communicate with others. The art museum not only brings people and art together but it has the capacity to so in a deeply meaningful way.

Art as an object of social value embodies three aspects: the human, conscious endeavor of the artist; the physical art object itself; and the spectator’s perceptions and responses. In most cases, artists create their work in the hopes of inspiring particular responses from those who see it and some, such as feminists and environmentalists, even hope for specific actions on the part of the viewers. However, the artist’s intent, when it is known, and the viewer’s perception can be radically different and have nothing in common. The artist’s intent, the art itself, and the viewer’s response are all informed by the social, cultural, and historical context in which the object was made and in which it was perceived. This philosophical stance is a rejection of the notion of art for art’s sake—the 19th-century, romantic theory that placed art and artists on pedestals that separated then from the rest of society. The form of a work of art is directly related to its content, ideas, and emotional expression and may be representational, fantastical, or abstract. The choice of materials that produce the formal elements is also directly related to content and can range from oil paint and marble to “anything under the sun.”

Methodology

The constructivist approach to meaning making, which is relevant to museum learning, is echoed in the qualitative methodology that I pursued in this study. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2000), the qualitative researcher seeks to make sense of the phenomenon being studied by examining the meaning people bring to it. Qualitative research is naturalistic and is concerned with describing and analyzing
people’s lives in the settings in which they occur (Wolcott, 1997). The objective of this research is not to generalize from these observations, but rather to expand what is already understood (Stokrocki, 1997). Unlike a positivist inquiry, qualitative research is less structured and without a predictable outcome. It meanders into the lives of others and into the life and practice of the researcher (Glesne, 1999).

A case study is not a methodology but rather the subject of what is to be studied (Stake, 1997). The qualitative researcher studies the case in all its complexities when and where they naturally occur and how they evolve over a period of time (Neuman, 2000). Instead of looking for generalities, the researcher looks for particularities and describes them with “thick description” (Stake). The case I am studying involves the development, organization, and presentation of a major museum retrospective exhibition, Symphonic Poem: The Art of Aminah Brenda Lynn Robinson and my role as a museum educator in it. Because I was so closely involved with all these aspects of the exhibition, I entered what Stake calls the “life space” (p. 406) of the research. I examine a variety of different components of the exhibition including the interviews I conducted with the artist, the community collaborations that were developed in conjunction with the exhibition, and programs that were presented in an effort to reach a wide audience. I analyze visitors’ responses utilizing a survey instrument and poetry written by adults and students about the exhibition. I assume several perspectives that Stokrocki (1997) describes as ranging from an observer to a full participant. By examining the complexities of this case and comparing my own experiences as an educator/curator with experiences of other museum educators, I have come to better understand my own work and add to the understanding of others in the field.
The study is based on an interpretist paradigm that is both phenomenological and hermeneutic. According to Polkinghorne (1983), phenomenology and hermeneutics inform one another, the phenomenological or descriptive “focusing beneath the surface of individual events in order to describe patterns, the hermeneutical focusing on the linguistic and nonlinguistic actions in order to penetrate to the meaning of these events” (p. 214). I carefully describe and examine the process of developing the exhibition based on the artist’s work and interviews I conducted during a period of eight months. Other aspects of my inquiry focus on educational programming and materials relating to the exhibition and visitors’ oral and written responses to them.

In examining Aminah Robinson and her work, I use the model of social science portraiture (Lightfoot, 1983). This process allows the researcher the freedom to combine conversations, stories, written materials from the points of view of both the artist and the researcher. This process is one in which the more distant view of the outsider (researcher) is combined with the subjective view of the insider (artist). Lightfoot notes that, “the truth lies in the integration of various perspectives rather than in the choice of one as dominant” (p.13). The outsider attempts to offer some order or shape to the portrait based on the insider’s view of what is important. Aminah describes the method of deep concentration that her father taught her as a young child as “penetrations.” The portrait process parallels this deep concentration and results in rich description. The inclusion of detailed stories that reveal the texture and tempo of the artist is an example of “life writing” (Bruner as cited in Lightfoot, 1983, p. 16). These detailed stories, in turn, determine the big ideas and thematic organization of the artist’s life and work. The close scrutiny of this method which Geertz (as cited in Lightfoot, p. 19) calls “thick
description” often reveals contradictions and inconsistencies, as well as repeated patterns. This method is at once personal and sympathetic and also tough and scrutinizing (Lightfoot, 1983, p. 369).

I examine Aminah, her work, the exhibition, and my role in it through the lens of feminist theory and, in particular, black feminist theory. Content analysis is a tool of feminist research theory and can expose “a pervasive and even misogynist culture” (Reinharz, 1992, p. 147). By analyzing Aminah’s work through the lens of feminist theory, its content reveals her efforts to demonstrate the resilience of oppressed black women through personal and historic examples.

I also examine the artist, her work, the exhibition, and museum education through the lens of critical race theory. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2000), critical theory is associated historically with the Frankfort School, a group of writers at the Institute for Social Research at the University of Frankfort in Germany. In 1923, theorists Theordor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Herbert Marcuse, and Walter Benjamin, working in the shadow of World War I, believed the time had come to find new ways of dealing with the forms of domination that had created the war and the economic depression that followed it. In an effort to repudiate the alienation, racism, and authoritarianism of a modern technological industrial society, they questioned capitalism and traditional Marxism, and rejected Soviet Communism. With the rise of Nazism, all but Benjamin escaped to the United States. (In 1940, Benjamin committed suicide rather than be taken by the Gestapo.) In the United States, these theorists did some of their most important work as a response to the racial and class discrimination they observed in this country (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Rohmann, 1999). These scholars and others who support their
assumptions believe that by reconstructing generally accepted views of society, a more
democratic and egalitarian framework can be achieved. Critical theorists explore issues of
power and justice and the dynamics of economic forces and matters of race, gender, and
class in regard to the realities of individuals’ lives.

Gloria Ladson-Billings (2000) insists on the importance of recognizing the
presence of epistemologies that are different from the dominant Euro-American “system
of knowing.” The dominant epistemology is the foundation of the social, educational, and
political institutions that comprise day-to-day living and contributes to the “othering” of
those who are not part of the dominant group. She advocates applying the principles of
critical race theory (CRT) that emerged in the mid-1970s when legal scholars challenged
the slow pace of race-related legal reform to deconstruct the dominant Euro-American
Enlightenment paradigm that nourished racism. Critical race theorists hold that racism is
so enmeshed in American life that it is considered the norm. The objective of CRT is to
unmask and expose racism and the white supremacy that has been responsible for
subordinating people of color and to change the legal channels that permit this to happen.
One strategy to achieve this is the use of storytelling in legal scholarship. This same
model can be considered in order to achieve democratic goals that museums foster. By
troubling and questioning the selection, development, and educational presentation of
exhibitions, those of us who work in museums have the opportunity to better serve our
diverse communities by fostering inclusion and working to eliminate racial and sexual
hegemony.

My means of data collection include several strategies of prolonged engagement
that contribute to the trustworthiness of the study. This triangulated approach consists of
what Glesne (2000) terms “multiple kinds of data sources” (p.31). I gathered data through in-depth interviews with the artist; poetry written by visitors who were inspired by the artist’s work; conversations with docents, teachers, individuals and groups of visitors to the exhibition; and my own notes and journals. I combined these interpretist approaches with surveys, this allowed me to further examine the experiences of visitors in the exhibition. Through a second set of surveys, I compared my own experience of being a museum educator with those professionals in similar positions in museums across the country. While surveys are usually associated with quantitative research, I used the surveys to gather the stories that demonstrated the connections visitors made with the art, and to examine visitor behavior in the exhibition. The surveys are one form of data collection and not the focus of my study. Qualitative and positivist approaches can be combined when the positivist is used to supplement the qualitative (Glesne, 2000). The surveys I sent to other museum educators helped me determine whether or not these educators feel their effectiveness is limited by departmental structures. Used this way in feminist research, surveys can help uncover the existence and extent of a problem (Reinharz, 1992).

In analyzing the data, I have looked for similarities, consistencies, and patterns that are pertinent to my research questions (Stake, 1997). Through this content analysis I discovered underlying themes and ideas. I also used comparative analysis (Stokrocki, 1997) to examine the experiences of museum visitors and to consider the experiences of museum educators.
Subjectivity

I recognize my own subjectivity in a number of areas. I am a long-time friend of Aminah Robinson. The trust that we have with one another because of this friendship has been very useful in many ways including the extensive interviews I did with the artist and in obtaining certain works of art, support material, and her cooperation in programming and marketing efforts related to the exhibition. My inquiry into the relationship between educators and curators in the museum setting stems from my own experiences as a museum professional. The idea of grounding one’s research in personal experience is an aspect of feminist research (Reinharz, 1992).

Aminah and I have enjoyed a warm friendship since the late 1980s when I wrote a brochure for a CMA exhibition about a series of her work called Pages in History. This blurring of the relationship between researcher and research participants is a characteristic of feminist and action research (Reinharz, 1992).

I am a product of a privileged, comfortable white middle-class background and a representative of the insider world of the art museum. Aminah is a survivor of a difficult, economically strapped African-American working class background and a mature artist who has been accepted by the art world to some degree, but who generally operates in her own very private art-making world. The fact that I am a white researcher focusing on the art of an African American gives my work a view that is different from that of an African-American researcher. In this respect, Aminah is the insider and I am the outsider. Race, gender, and ethnicity are all factors in this research and cannot be separated from it (Glesne, 1999).
As she began telling me stories about her life and work in preparation for the exhibition, the similarities between us became more apparent and the differences more understandable for each of us. First and foremost, we were both women. “For a woman to be understood in a social research project, it may be necessary for her to be interviewed by a woman,” suggests Reinharz (1992), “A woman listening with care and caution enables another woman to develop ideas, construct meaning, and use words that say what she means” (pp. 23-24). Both of us are immersed in aspects of art and in agreement about the social value of art. Aminah created her work to communicate with a wide audience, and as a museum educator I was in a position to help her achieve this goal. We share what P. H. Collins (2000) calls “the ethics of caring” in which “personal expressiveness, emotions, and empathy are central to the knowledge validation process” (p. 262-63). One of the most important goals of the exhibition was the inclusion and emphasis of Aminah’s personal and particular stories about her work as a means to engage visitors. Those who examined Aminah’s work had the opportunity to gain understanding through her experiences and, at the same time, were encouraged to consider the importance of their own stories.

In his discussion of the current state of black-Jewish relations, Cornel West (2001) points out that “common histories of oppression and degradation of both groups served as a springboard for genuine empathy and principled alliances” (p. 104). Similarities in the histories of African Americans and Jews have provided another means of diminishing the outsider/insider aspect of our relationship. Both of us trace our roots to ancestors who had been persecuted and who had endured great suffering. As a Jew, the shadow of the Holocaust is a part of my psyche in the same way slavery is a part of
Aminah’s. In Diaspora and Visual Culture, African-American and Jewish scholars consider the traumatic effects of the past on both of their communities. “In a postmodern society,” notes editor Nicholas Mirzoeff (2000), “questions of identity assume a colossal significance, particularly for those groups which carry with them histories of diaspora, exclusion, and dispersion” (p. 199). When I see Aminah’s haunting work about the slave quarters on Goree Island (see Figure 2) that remain as a testimony to the millions of Africans who were forced into slavery, I, like Aminah, hear the voices of Africans. I am also reminded of the remains of deserted concentration camps in Europe and of the voices of the Jewish men, women, and children who perished there. Although these horrific periods in history cannot be compared, the structures where so many died in both situations echo with the cries of ancestors.

Theoretical Groundings

The theoretical foundation of my work is connected to the work of museum studies scholars who emphasize the need for museums to consider the life experiences and knowledge of their audiences (Hooper-Greenhill, 1999; Falk & Dierking, 2000; Hein & Alexander, 1998; Roberts, 1997; Weil, 2002). Their work is grounded in the educational philosophy of Dewey (1938/1997) and in the research of Piaget concerning the relationship between an individual’s experience and his or her ability to learn (as cited in Hein, 1998). “Experience” is the actual physical sense of engaging in or observing an activity and is also the basis for understanding new experiences—that is, for learning. Gardner’s theory (as cited in Hein, 1998) that people have multiple intelligences and that
each individual has preferences for one or more of these intelligences has also influenced museum education and resulted in a proliferation of hands-on exhibitions with activities that appeal to visitors with a variety of learning styles.

In the last fifteen years, researchers who have focused on learning in museums have built on the work of Piaget, Dewey, Gardner, and others. All of their work provides a foundation for my research into visitor-centered museum education. In the case study of an exhibition at the Chicago Botanical Gardens, Roberts (1997) examines the outcomes in which she and other educators had an equal role with curators in developing and presenting an exhibition. She considers the museum’s function as entertainment, empowerment, and experience for the visitor and draws the conclusion that meaning making in museums should be “the constant negotiation between the stories given by museums and those brought by visitors” (p. 14). Hein (1998) links learning to experience and calls for the constructivist museum in which the visitors’ comfort and orientation to the building are always considered and in which the museum takes great care to compare objects and ideas that might be unfamiliar to the public with those objects and ideas that are familiar. In Great Britain, Hooper-Greenhill (1994) has analyzed visitor learning in museums and emphasizes the necessity for museums to create an optimum setting for learning by focusing on the physical and psychological comfort of visitors. Falk and Dierking’s research (2000, 2002) is based on the Contextual Model of Learning in which learning is influenced by personal, sociocultural, and physical contexts. Their study concerns free choice learning, the learning that people chose for themselves and exercise when they decide to visit an art museum. Weil (2002), a Smithsonian educator for more than 40 years, discusses the paradigm shift that is affecting today’s museums. This shift is
from the internally and institution-centered museum to one that is driven by public expectations of the museum. In this postmodern paradigm, the museum staff acknowledges the fact that objects and exhibitions can have many interpretations and that those based on visitors’ knowledge, experiences, and worldviews also have validity.

In recent years, educators have conducted and reported on research that details strategies for creating museum exhibitions to encourage meaningful experiences for those who attend them (Hooper-Greenhill, 1999; Spock, 2000; Roberts, 1997). Yet time and again these studies are prefaced with observations indicating how difficult it has been for change to actually occur, especially in American museums. Hooper-Greenhill (1999) observes that, in some cases, American museums have lagged behind their British counterparts in making museums and exhibitions venues for creative learning rather than repositories of facts. Spock (2000) describes the disconnect that still exists between the presentation of exhibitions and what we know about learning. Similarly, in her epilogue to Knowledge to Narrative, a book detailing an exhibition created by museum educators and based on current learning theory, Roberts (1997) notes that the very successful visitor-centered exhibition she describes in her study was closed because the museum needed more space for its business operations.

Mayer (1998) questioned whether museums can truly be people-centered rather than object-centered if the training of museum curators does not change to reflect the people-centered view. In my experience, I believe that many of today’s curators and administrators recognize the benefits of a people-centered approach to museum education.
in which visitors are empowered to construct their own meaning. One of the questions I address is the effects of this museum-wide attention to education on the roles of museum educators.

In regard to establishing successful museum/school collaborations, Hazelroth and Moore (1998) emphasize the importance of a museum staff’s willingness to empower teachers, students, parents, docents, and artists to form a community of learners. Berry (1998) cites findings of a survey conducted by the National Center for Art Museum/School Collaborations (NCAMSC) that strongly recommends that museums understand classroom curriculum in order to develop successful collaborations with schools. A recent study (Walker and Manjarez, 2003) on community partnerships concludes that collaborations maximize staff, financial, and technology resources and serve the needs of diverse populations. Often these collaborations provide motivation for participation by reaching audiences through their family, social, and cultural affiliations. All of these collaborative efforts underscore the importance of empowering the public and of opening museums to their voices.

Timeline

My research dates from the spring of 2001 when I began working on Symphonic Poem. I detail the conceptual framework of the exhibition as it evolved from this time during conversations with the artist. I describe the interviews I arranged with the artist that took place from August 2001 through March 2002. I examine related programs that occurred and response to the exhibition when it was presented at the Columbus Museum of Art from December 13, 2002, through April 20, 2003. Because Symphonic Poem traveled to the Brooklyn Art Museum, Tacoma Art Museum, and the Toledo Museum of
Art until May 20, 2007, I have had the opportunity to examine response from audiences in these venues and include it in my research. I continue to work closely with Aminah Robinson in several capacities. I serve as curator for *Along Water Street: New Work by Aminah Brenda Lynn Robinson* at the Columbus Museum of Art, July 6, 2007- February 24, 2008, and continue to work on developing a Web site that will be launched in 2008 and a study center that will be part of the museum’s 2010 renovation. I refer to these projects in several sections of this dissertation.

Summary

Museum education research has come into its own in the last 15 years. Part of this interest is spurred by the need for museums to be relevant to the public if they are to prosper. Some practitioners believe that in order to remain relevant, museum workers must re-envision and re-position themselves by assuring public accessibility and inclusiveness (Henry, 2006). *Symphonic Poem: The Art of Aminah Brenda Lynn Robinson* provides the opportunity to examine many aspects of mounting an exhibition and evaluating its relevancy to the public. Perhaps the museum’s goal of including more voices and perspectives starts at the very inception of an exhibition with the inclusion of museum educators. My experience as an exhibition curator will raise questions about current practice and provide a useful perspective for future practice. The centrality of education in the museum’s agenda seems secure, but the understanding of what education means and how and by whom it is to be delivered are not particularly clear. In fall 2006, the editors of the *Journal of Museum Education* centered the entire issue on the topic of the relevance of museum educators. Clearly the discussion is timely. This study also presents critical strategies for “using” Aminah Robinson’s work to encourage those who
see it to confront issues of identity, race, and oppression. Through this qualitative study, I hope to be part of an exciting and provoking dialogue about the challenges and opportunities facing museums and, in particular, about the role and identity of museum educators in the twenty-first century.
CHAPTER 2
CONTEXTUAL BACKGROUND

In this chapter, I review the history of museum education in an effort to ground my own experience as a museum educator. I consider the movement from object-centered museums to audience- and community-centered museums. I trace this movement through a sampling of museum mission statements. Then I critically examine exhibitions with the goal of “troubling” issues that are inherent in the process of display. Using the ground-breaking essays in Exhibiting Cultures (Karp & Lavine, Eds., 1991), I examine the issue of voice in an exhibition of a contemporary artist, the political challenges of organizing exhibitions focusing on cultural groups, and inherent problems with exhibiting cultural objects.

History of Museum Education

From their inceptions in the late 19th and early 20th centuries to the present, museum founders, donors, practitioners and scholars have considered museums educational institutions (Zeller, 1989; Hein & Alexander, 1998). In 1969, the federal government’s Tax Reform Act officially designated museums as educational entities (Caston, 1989). Over the years, academics and practitioners in education and the museum field have carefully examined and reconsidered the role of education in museums. More than a hundred years ago, many museums in this country were founded to promote cultural knowledge and influence the public’s taste (Preziosi, 1998; Zeller, 1989). City leaders valued museums as institutions that stimulated the economy of the city and
provided a venue for the study of design by students who would one day be part of an improved labor force. The development of American museums echoed the pattern set by England’s South Kensington Museum that grew out of the Crystal Palace Exposition held in 1851. The South Kensington Museum (later the Victoria and Albert Museum), like the Crystal Palace Exposition, made the decorative and industrial arts accessible to the public. In this country, international expositions in Philadelphia in 1876 and Chicago in 1893 contributed to the proliferation of museums (Columbus Art Association, 1900; Zeller, 1989). The democratic notion that drove this museum movement was a belief in the inherent value of sharing collections of fine arts and technology with a wide public. Art museums in particular were grounded in the primacy of the object as an important indicator of the social and cultural history of the world (Preziosi, 1998).

As a result of the importance accorded collections and the objects that formed them, the emphasis of museums throughout most of the twentieth century has been on the object rather than the visitor (Hooper-Greenhill, 1995). The centrality of the object and its curatorial perspective were underscored in exhibition installations and related educational material and programs. As recently as twenty-five years ago when I began my career as a museum educator, many museum professionals including myself believed in the existence of a singular art history that was told through the objects we exhibited. We presented the story of the object. The education department was responsible for communicating the curators’ views to the public through tours, lectures, and exhibition brochures, and for providing programs for children and families and students and teachers. Instead of facilitating conversations with their tour groups as they do today, docents presented art-historical lectures based on objects. Since that time and to varying
degrees, museum workers have shifted to an approach that includes input from staff outside curatorial departments and emphasizes the needs, concerns, and opinions of the visitor. This shift of emphasis is reflected in the operations, exhibitions, and programs, of the Columbus Museum of Art. By emblazoning its letterhead stationery and all its promotional materials with the motto, “Art Speaks, join the conversation,” the museum encourages individuals to voice their opinions.

In the 1980s, critical social theory became part of the discourse of art education and resulted in the teaching concepts of visual culture (Freedman, 2003). Freedman defines visual culture as: “all that is humanly formed or sensed through vision or visualization and shapes the way we live our lives” (p. 1). She further notes that visual culture includes an array of visual representations including the fine arts, tribal arts, folk arts, performance, television, advertising, and computer design and contributes to forming identities both through art-making and art-viewing. During this same period, in response to feminist and multiculturalist concerns, many art museums began to respond to the questioning of the traditional canons of art history on which their collections and exhibitions were based. This modern museum as Hooper-Greenhill (2000) labeled it existed “by giving authority to certain texts, figures, ideas, problems, discursive strategies, and historical narratives. This is a strategy of boundary maintenance through which some are enabled to speak and are empowered but others are silenced and marginalized” (p. 21).

In the more recent museum, named the “post-museum” by Hooper-Greenhill (2000), if a canon remains at all, it has been greatly expanded and redefined to include the art of women, minorities, and non-Western cultures. In the past, an object was
considered to be a work of art based on its media, the technical skill required to make it, and its compositional complexity. Freedman (2003) points out that “such qualitative differences between visual forms have become less discrete” (p. 87) with the result that high and low art borders have been blurred. With the fragmentation of the canon, the authority once accorded to art historians has been questioned, and the meaning they assign to objects has become one of a number of possible interpretations. Each art object has the potential to generate an infinite number of stories— the one the museum tells and those that each viewer formulates. Museum theorist George Hein (1995) maintains that those who view art construct their own narratives about it that are personal and based on their own prior knowledge and experience. These narratives are often different from the narratives intended by exhibition makers. From this perspective, objects by themselves have no inherent meaning but are given multiple meanings by those who observe them including exhibition creators and visitors. Objects are important but they are meaningless without the stories that people create about them (Gurian, 1999). This theory—that knowledge is the result of an individual’s experiences— reflects the same ideas that have permeated the social sciences and humanities and that has resulted in social constructionism in the social sciences and constructivism in learning theory. In many art museums, it has spurred a shift from teaching art history to the use of visual culture interpretive approaches as a means to engage students in critical pedagogy (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000).

In 1992, the American Association of Museums issued a report that redefined museums as institutions of public service and education. The report urged museums to place education at the core of their missions, to actively seek to serve diverse audiences,
to establish strong leadership to support these ends, and to generate the necessary resources. In part, the report was a response to the situations that many museums were facing and continue to face: rising costs and fixed or diminishing support from traditional sources (Kriedler, 2000). In order to secure their roles as public service and educational institutions that serve broad-based audiences, the AAM report cites many recommendations that support a visitor-centered museum. These include involving in exhibition selection and design all staff members who serve the public; establishing community advisory groups to help develop programs and materials; forming collaborations with individuals and organizations representing a broad spectrum of the community; and encouraging the inclusion of a variety of interpretations in regard to collections and exhibitions.

A multitude of scholars in recent years have focused on visitors (Falk & Dierking, 2000; G. E. Hein, 1998; Roberts, 1997). These researchers have scrutinized audiences and affirmed the important learning and meaning-making which occur in museums. These scholars also examine the environment that brings people to the museum and the environment that keeps them away. Museums face increased competition for the public’s leisure time and dollars from the rise of technology-related entertainment, sporting events, and the proliferation of culturally related events organized by both not-for-profit and commercial entities. The visitor experience and any subsequent learning and meaning-making that occur in museums cannot take place until the visitor chooses to cross the threshold. As a result, museum professionals in education, marketing,
development, and curatorial departments are called upon to collaborate to make museums attractive to visitors through exhibitions, programs, special events, and visitor amenities such as shops, restaurants, and family spaces.

Researchers in museum learning emphasize the importance of the visitor and the connections he or she makes with objects and exhibitions. In order for museums to survive, they must be relevant to people’s lives (Hooper-Greenhill, 1995). In order for visitors to have a museum experience in which learning occurs, they must be able to construct their own meaning by connecting with what they already know, “the new must be able to be incorporated into the old” (G. E. Hein, 1998, p. 153). Roberts (1997) urges museums to become “people-centered” by encouraging visitors to create their own narratives or interpretations of objects. Falk and Dierking (2000) propose a Contextual Model of Learning based on personal, sociocultural, and physical contexts that encourage visitors to make choices about the meaning they make in museums based on their own experiences and knowledge. Objects have no inherent meaning but each visitor imbues the object with meaning based on his or her own memories, experiences, and connections (Weil, 2002).

An educative museum is one that Carr (2003) defines as a place where groups of objects are carefully arranged to assist the viewer in making connections that result in cognition. All of these museum theorists consider objects and visitors essential components of the museum learning equation, but each of them places the emphasis of the equation on visitors and their capacity to learn based on prior knowledge and experience. These theories have informed my own practice and support the efficacy of a collaboration between an educator and a curator like the example that I detail in this case.
study. Interwoven in current theory about museum education is the emergence and effects of the technology revolution. Technology has affected the experience of museum visitors both on site and online. The widespread use of the internet, distance learning, and handheld communication has changed the access to and delivery of museum exhibitions and programs and has had a tremendous effect on every aspect of what it means to connect people with art.

*Mission Statements*

Current art museum mission statements reflect the ideas found in museum studies literature. The idea of welcoming visitors, connecting collections and exhibitions with their experiences, and reflecting their communities are as likely to be mentioned as “the care, preservation, and presentation of works of art” that were the hallmark of earlier mission statements. For example, the mission of the Grand Rapids Art Museum is to serve as “a gathering place where people of all ages and backgrounds can enrich their lives through interaction with authentic works of art…” (Grand Rapids Art Museum mission statement, 2003) and the Brooklyn Museum of Art is dedicated to “the primacy of the visitor experience” (Brooklyn Museum of Art mission statement, n.d.) The mission statement of the Indianapolis Museum of Art places collecting, preserving, and exhibiting original works of art after a statement about the institution’s goal of being “a multifaceted experience” (Indianapolis Museum of Art mission statement, n.d.). Similarly, The Columbus Museum of Art’s board of trustees and staff in 1994 revised its mission statement and defined the Museum as “an educational and cultural center for the people of central Ohio dedicated to the pursuit of excellence through education, collections, and exhibitions.” In 2002, under the leadership of a new director, the mission
was again rewritten to further emphasize the visitor experience. The new mission statement, “Great experiences with great art for everyone (Columbus Museum of Art mission statement, 2007),” reflects the goals of staff and board to create an environment responsive to serving a broad public. This mission statement, like the others mentioned above, emphasizes the visitor experience of the museum rather than an intrinsic value of the art itself.

At the very core of the art museum’s educational mission is the manner in which it presents its collections and special exhibitions. An exhibition is itself an artifact of museum education because it reflects a particular institution’s perspective on what it means to educate and on the relationship of visitor and object (Roberts, 1997). As a museum educator, I have had the opportunity to serve as a curator for Symphonic Poem: The Art of Aminah Brenda Lynn Robinson from 2002 until June 2007. The intersection of educator and curator raises interesting possibilities for museum education. By presenting a case study of a major museum retrospective of a contemporary artist, I shed light on the outcomes that are the result of having an educator directly involved in developing, organizing, and presenting an exhibition. The need to have educators involved in all aspects of exhibition planning is not radical or new (El-Omani, 1989). What is new is the call for a reconfiguration of museum organization that enables all museum workers to support visitor-centered goals most effectively.

*Museum Relevancy in the 21st Century*

Weil (2002) raises a crucial issue with which museums are currently grappling and which has far-reaching implications for all museum workers, especially educators and curators. The question revolves around the very nature of museums and their
relevancy and value to the communities which they serve. Government and private arts
funding organizations, museum workers and their professional organizations, and
academics in the field are interrogating the relevancy and value of museums. The Journal
of Museum Education (Bailey, 2006; Anderson, 2006) devoted two entire issues to the
question of museum relevancy and the Ford Foundation published case studies of
museum exhibitions that call for the museum to serve as a forum for civic dialogue
(Korza & Bacon, 2005). Museum education professionals and academics are
investigating the social responsibility of museums and some have even started a journal
devoted to the subject, Museums & Social Issues. K-12 art education theorists and
practitioners have been working to use art as a means of social reconstruction to
challenge traditional power structures that nourish oppression based on race, gender,
class, and sexual orientation (Hicks, 1994; Albers, 1999; Ballengee-Morris & Stuhr,
2001). Like teachers, museum workers who develop exhibitions can use art as a means
of engaging visitors in reflection and criticism and even help them change previously
held ideas that run counter to democratic ideals of freedom and equality. Art makes ideas
visible (Albers, 1999) and provides the opportunity for those who view it to consider the
legitimacy or illegitimacy of many different voices, practices, and life styles. The work of
Aminah Robinson provides a platform to discuss issues of gender, race, and class. By
delving with great detail into the history, culture, and societal framework of her African
American community and ancestral legacy, she creates a window of understanding for
those who are both inside and outside this community. While her work does not
represent all women or all African Americans or all people who have been on welfare, it reveals a valuable voice and articulate perspective that can lead to understanding by those who experience it.

Critical educator Henry Giroux (1999) calls for the construction of “ideological and institutional conditions in which the lived experience of empowerment for the vast majority of students becomes the defining feature of schooling.” I believe we can transfer this type of critical approach from the schoolroom to the museum and to our presentation of exhibitions. Empowerment concerns maximizing the individual’s potential as it connects to social betterment. This requires individuals to question social practices instead of conforming to them and to view culture as not set and constant but rather as “a site of multiple and heterogeneous borders where different histories, languages, experiences, and voices come together amidst diverse relations of power and privilege” (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000, p. 140). Through interdisciplinary approaches, this critical pedagogy seeks to raise questions about the relationship of those with power and those who are marginalized and provide a re-reading of history that reclaims power and identity as these are shaped by categories of race, gender, class, and ethnicity. Amnah’s work provides an example of this type of “re-reading of history.”

The call by critical educators and theorists to include multiple voices, including those of women and those of minorities, can be applied to museums as well classroom situations. Art educator and theorist David Darts (2004) believes that by introducing socially engaged artists, students can explore cultural, historical, and political complexities. “By exposing their students to this work,” he writes, “art educators can begin to challenge disenfranchised conceptions of the social role and political relations of
art to power, culture and democratic citizenship” (pp. 313-347). Aminah’s work celebrates her family and community, but it also is a critical examination of slavery, civil rights, the welfare system, racial identity, and women’s rights. In addition, the media and processes that the artist uses in the work itself challenge traditional Western notions about what is art and about who is an artist. Aminah’s work encourages a critical examination of how we define creative expression and whether or not academic training and the use of traditional art materials affect how we value the artist and her work.

Kevin Kumashiro (2002), the founding director of the Center for Anti-Oppressive Education, details a four-pronged approach to anti-oppressive pedagogy that includes education for the Other, education about the Other, education that is critical of privilege and Othering, and education that changes students and society. By formulating exhibition strategies that foreground work about and by minority artists, museums have the opportunity to create “safe places” for diverse audiences. For example, more than half of the nearly 6,000 fifth graders who visit the Columbus Museum of Art each year from the Columbus Public Schools are African American. Aminah’s work presents an African-American perspective on family, community, and history and provides a comfortable space for African Americans in which being an African American is normal and dominant rather than “other” and minority. At the same time, it serves as education about the “other” for non-African-American students. Aminah’s depiction of the Middle Passage, slavery, emancipation, northern migration, Civil Rights, and the role of women can be springboards to discussions of privileging and othering. Her work can also be linked to discussions and activities (see Appendix A) that encourage students to work for
social justice. Museum workers can apply these same principles of anti-oppressive pedagogy to exhibition design and programs to encourage civic (public) dialogue and even social action.

In attempts to increase the value in which the public holds museums, a number of museums have presented exhibitions and programs that encourage civic dialogue and that deal with controversial subjects. In acting as “community response agencies,” museums can “shape public opinion, promote tolerance, advocate for social justice, and help improve the quality of life for community residents” (Chew, 2005, p. vi). For example, the Andy Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh invited the public to dialogue in response to the exhibition, *Without Sanctuary*, which focused on photographs and postcards of lynchings in America from the antebellum period to the first half of the 20th century. Chew points out, care must be taken so as “to challenge and not alienate,” to inspire wonder rather than generate boredom, and to encourage looking to the future instead of becoming mired in the past. Conversations about these issues continue the ground-breaking discussion that was presented in *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display* (Karp & Lavine, 1991) which I discuss below. Art such as that of Aminah Robinson can serve as an impetus to critically confront, examine, and discuss issues of race, gender, and economic oppression. By engaging visitors in critical thinking about issues that relate to their experiences and concerns and those of their communities, we create an atmosphere in which understanding and social change are possibilities.

Through her work, Aminah resists and counters stereotypes of African Americans and of women, exposes the dehumanizing effects of poverty, corrects and adds to accounts of history written by those who dominate, and rescues memories and aspects of
the past from oblivion. The concerns given voice by her work are increasingly relevant in the present neoliberal climate created by a market-driven, global market in which deregulation, privatization, and consumerism are privileged and issues of social justice and remembering are de-emphasized (Giroux, 2003; Apple, 1993). Giroux points out the need to actively pursue democratic ideals in education:

As the history of race is either left out or misrepresented by the official channels of power in the United States, it is crucial that the history of slavery, civil rights, racial politics, and ongoing modes of struggle at the level of everyday life be remembered and used pedagogically to challenge the historical amnesia that feeds neoliberalism’s ahistorical claim to power and the continuity of its claims to common sense. The struggle against racial injustice cannot be separated from larger questions about what kind of culture and society are emerging under the imperatives of neoliberalism, what kind of history it ignores, and what alternatives might point to a substantive democratic future (p. 207).

Michael Apple (1993) has written extensively about critical education as a means of fighting the conservatism of the Right in schools:

What counts as legitimate knowledge is the result of complex power relations and struggles among identifiable class, race, gender, and religious groups. Thus, power and education are terms of an indissoluble couplet. It is at times of social upheaval that this relationship between education and power becomes most visible. Such a relationship was and continues to be made manifest in the struggles by women, people of color, and others to have history and knowledge included in the curriculum (p. 46-47).

Both Giroux and Apple look to the theory of Brazilian educator Paolo Freire (1970) who advocates a critical pedagogy that aims to empower the oppressed through literacy and social consciousness (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Rohmann, 1999). This “pedagogy of the oppressed” as Freire calls it, “…must be forged with not for, the oppressed (whether individual or peoples) in the incessant struggle to regain their humanity” (p. 45). These scholars and others who support their assumptions believe that
by reconstructing generally accepted views of society, a more democratic and egalitarian framework can be achieved. The work that Aminah has been creating for more than 50 years is her effort to reconstruct generally accepted views of society to include her experiences and those of her community.

Exhibitions: Excellence and Exploitation

“The notion that the museum world, and in particular the world of art museums is ipso facto wonderful and deserving of the world’s support and adoration is not only outdated but pernicious” (Pachter, 2002, p. x).

Judging from the papers presented at the Smithsonian’s 1988 symposium, *The Poetics and Politics of Representation* and published in Ivan Karp’s and Stephen D. Lavine’s edited volume, museum exhibitions are like mined fields in a war zone and should be approached with great trepidation. While most of the articles deal with exhibitions of minority cultures within a community or of “exotic” cultures outside the community altogether, many of the issues they raise are relevant to all exhibitions. From the moment an idea for an exhibition germinates in the mind of a museum worker, a university scholar, a collector, or in the discussions of an exhibition team, it reflects choices and decisions that are both inclusive and exclusive. A decision to organize an exhibition or even to host a traveling exhibition in the first place has political ramifications. Exhibitions themselves are potentially political arenas “in which definitions of identity and culture are asserted and contested” (Karp & Lavine, 1991, p. 1). From my biased perspective as a museum educator, I firmly believe that museums and their exhibitions can be sources of general enlightenment, cross-cultural understanding, and innovative and imaginative thinking for audiences. At the same time, I believe that
museum workers and those with whom they collaborate outside the museum need to be constantly aware of the limitations of representation and of the responsibility to make their audiences cognizant of these limitations as well.

In one form or another, the subject of “poetics and politics” in regard to art museums and their exhibitions has been discussed and debated for decades. Those who value art for its beauty, form, and for its "own sake” see the museum as a temple where exhibited art is to be seen and appreciated and those who value art for its ideas, content, and social relevancy consider the museum and its exhibitions as a forum for delving into history and understanding cultures (Karp & Lavine, 1991). In writing about representation, scholar Stephen Greenblatt (1991) calls for a balance between a contextual approach to art that he calls “resonance” and an aesthetic approach that he calls “wonder.” He discusses these terms:

By resonance I mean the power of the displayed object to reach out beyond its formal boundaries to a larger world, to evoke in the viewer the complex, dynamic cultural forces from which it has emerged and for which it may be taken by a viewer to stand. By wonder, I mean the power of the displayed object to stop the viewer in his or her tracks, to convey an arresting sense of uniqueness, to evoke an exalted attention (p. 42).

To evoke only wonder in the display of cultural objects runs the risk of exploiting and exoticizing the cultures they represent. In establishing resonance, exhibition makers have the daunting task of navigating issues of identity, politics, and “othering.” For the visitor, meaning making is certain to begin at the intersection of wonder and resonance.

The proliferation of art museums in the this country in the 19th century was grounded in the belief that a universal appreciation of beauty and design based on standards embodied in Western art could provide moral and social benefits to the public.
In the early 1900s, museums shifted from emphasizing these social and moral concerns to focusing on the pleasures of viewing (Truettner, 2002). With the exception of programs for school children, museums tended to serve audiences that were affluent and educated. Curators highly trained in specific areas of art history and connoisseurship developed exhibitions of interest to this limited audience. Historian Neil Harris (1999) observes that until the late 1960s, a museum was a “self-enclosed world, clearly defined by hierarchies of prestige and privilege, visited by largely traditional audiences, and promulgating an ideal of self-restraint in their display of art, history, science, and culture” (p. 38). Since the 1970s, museums have attempted to become user-friendly, develop collaborations with other community organizations, and diversify their collections and exhibition schedules. They have presented controversial exhibitions that encourage discourse and debate and they have emulated the for-profit world and have become self-promoters and merchandisers. This new paradigm, which seeks to broaden the visitor base and enhance the visitor experience, has altered and added to the responsibilities of all those who work in museums and has affected the choice and presentation of exhibitions.

Issues surrounding the representation of minorities in museums and the relationship between museums and their audiences are complex. In recent years, museums have moved toward creating audience-centered museum experiences in which they recognize the neutrality of the object. In discussing the authenticity of objects, Crew and Sims (1991) conclude that objects are “dumb”; they have no meaning until someone perceives them and creates a story about them. “Authenticity,” they observe, “is not about factuality or reality. It is about authority. Objects have no authority; people do” (p. 163). By the time every object has been secured in a particular location in an exhibition; the
text, labels, maps, and other supportive material installed; the floors polished; and the
lighting completed, the exhibited objects have been given a voice and the exhibition has a
story to tell. Visitors who enter the space respond to the story based on their own
experiences and knowledge. They either fit the exhibition to what they already know or
they have a transformative experience in which they re-organize their thinking based on
what they see (Karp & Lavine, 1991). In order to demonstrate the importance of voice, I
examine several different types of exhibitions: the first is a monographic exhibition about
a contemporary artist in which I use the example of Aminah Robinson and the Symphonic
Poem exhibition. The second type is a thematic exhibition that includes work by minority
artists; and the third is the exhibition of ethnic art. I also explore museum family days as
a source of cross-cultural exchange and I conclude with a discussion of the crucial
relationship between audiences and exhibitions.

Voice and a Contemporary Artist

When the subject of an exhibition is a solo contemporary artist, the artist has the
opportunity to speak for himself or herself and give voice to the exhibition. Curator Mark
Rosenthal (2002) points out that a thematic exhibition requires more text and curatorial
voice, while exhibitions:

devoted to an individual contemporary artist are often the result of a
greater or lesser degree of collaboration between curator and artist.…
the living artist deserves to have a heavy hand in his or her exhibition,
both the concept and the shape of it as well as the catalogue. Think of
a city planner or social engineer redoing a community without
consulting its inhabitants. Their interests are undeniable and inalienable
( pp. 77-78).

In 2001-2002, the year prior to the opening of Symphonic Poem, I interviewed and audio
recorded Aminah Robinson’s stories and comments about her life and about her
paintings, sculptures, and drawings during a period of eight months. These comments in
the artist’s own words became the entries that accompanied objects in the exhibition
catalogue and much of the text on the extended object labels in the exhibition. My goal
in using these quotes was to make the connection between artist and viewer as direct as
possible. Based on these extensive interviews, the co-curator and I built the outline of the
exhibition and the catalogue. Since we are not African American and Aminah is, we
purposely engaged scholars of color to contribute essays to the catalogue. Although on
many occasions, Aminah had assured us that she was very comfortable with both curators
of the exhibition being white, we all agreed on the importance of having African
American scholars contribute essays to the catalogue in addition to the ones Annegreth
and I would write. In her introduction to *Black Feminist Thought*, P. Collins (2000)
points out that “…it is both possible to be centered in one’s own experiences and engaged
in coalitions with others” (p. x.). Aminah, co-curator Annegreth Nill, and I had an
established relationship that spanned many years. We were all women committed to
ideals of social justice and, as a result, there was a strong sense of rapport among us.
Although we were completely comfortable working with Aminah throughout the
development and organization of the exhibition, we recognized the need to have voices
reflecting a broad range of perspectives for the catalogue essays. We asked three
scholars, Leslie King-Hammond, Ramona Austin, and Kenneth Goings, with expertise in
African-American art, African art, and African-American history respectively to join us
in contributing essays to the catalogue. These scholars contextualized Aminah’s work
from three different perspectives based on their own study of the cultural and artistic
traditions of Africans and African Americans. Only the largest museums in the country
have the luxury of in-house staff who have both the expertise and ethnicity to fit the needs of a diverse exhibition schedule. A “win-win” solution to this problem is to develop collaborations with those on college and university faculties, collectors, scholars, and other interested individuals to add expertise and a multiplicity of voices to exhibitions.

Although the task of exhibiting the work of a solitary artist is less problematic than a group or thematic show, the selection of the artist in the first place is no less controversial. The stress on financial and human resources in mounting a major retrospective exhibition of an artist represents a major commitment for any museum. The selection of one artist means that other deserving artists will not have the same opportunity. Historian Carol Duncan (1991) asserts:

Museums can be powerful identity-defining machines. To control a museum means precisely to control the representation of a community and some of its highest, most authoritative truths. It also means the power to define and rank people, to declare some as having a greater share than others in the community’s common heritage (pp. 101-102).

For the most part, museums remain their own authorities in the selection of exhibitions and make decisions about inclusion and exclusion with every exhibition that is presented. Those that are included are often the result of the expertise of a curator in a particular area or of a close relationship that museum workers maintain with an artist. Sometimes an exhibition is presented because a particular collector or donor is interested in the subject. In regard to *Symphonic Poem*, the museum and Aminah Robinson developed a relationship that spanned several decades and the arrivals and departures of a number of directors, curators, and educators. This sustained interest in Aminah’s work was based on its form, its content, and the compelling issues of identity it addressed for both
majority and minority audiences. Because the subject of her work consistently and over
time embraced the specificity of the local community and connected it to the history and
culture of the United States and Africa, it became a perfect vehicle in the museum’s effort
to serve its traditional audience and to increase participation from the local African-
American community. For the African American viewer, we hoped that the exhibition
would trigger personal memories about the history of area neighborhoods and
experiences of growing up in them and, for some, the ancestral memory of Africa, the
middle passage, slavery, migration. For the non-African American, Aminah’s work could
clarify cultural, historical, and social connections and could present an insider’s view of
life in the neighborhood. These assumptions about what the visitor might learn from an
exhibition are only possibilities; what visitors learn and or remember is impossible to
predict. One art educator (Hicks, 1994) points out the dangers of assigning “sameness” to
cultural groups. When she first began teaching, this art teacher assumed that African-
American students would be interested in images of masks and other objects from Africa.
She found that the African-American students had no particular affinity with Africa and
that they did not want to be identified with Africa by their non African-American
classmates. To avoid this type of spurious goal-setting, museum workers should attempt
to gauge public opinion through visitor focus groups, interviews, and surveys that are
conducted prior to exhibition goal-setting.

When “outsiders” enter Aminah’s world, some see a vital and spirited community
that is very different from the one they might have imagined. The deprivations of life
often associated with the “projects” are deconstructed and are replaced with the idea that
that these neighborhoods consisted of people who worked and played hard, cared for their
families and friends, and enjoyed a rich cultural life. Aminah’s work demonstrates the idea of “counter storytelling” that Ladson-Billings (2000) explains can be used “…to demonstrate how the same phenomenon can be told in different and multiple ways depending on the storytellers” (p. 268). The responsibility of those who create exhibitions is to make every effort to ensure that the voice of the contemporary artist, minority or not, is heard clearly and as directly as possible. At the same time, we need to allow for a multiplicity of responses from visitors. Museum workers who develop exhibitions should be cognizant that the story being told by the museum is one of many and that they should encourage visitors to formulate their own interpretations. These ideas, of course, apply not only to developing an exhibition about an individual artist, but also to the presentation of thematic exhibitions.

**Voice in a Thematic Exhibition**

In the 1987 exhibition, *Hispanic Art in the United States: Thirty Contemporary Painters and Sculptors*, curators at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, hoped to shape an exhibition “that would establish Hispanic art as a phenomenon specific not only to a culture but to a historical moment, and as an artistic movement of a high order of achievement” (Livingston & Beardsley, 1991, p. 111). While the exhibition succeeded in introducing the work to an enthusiastic public, it was the subject of impassioned debate and criticism by museum professionals, academics, and critics. From its inception, the curators realized the daunting task of representing contemporary Hispanic art through the work of thirty artists. After they amassed information about more than 600 artists from across the country, they began formulating guidelines to organize the work. Some of these guidelines became the basis for the criticism after the exhibition opened. For
example, the curators’ decision to include only painting and sculpture eliminated important categories of Hispanic art such as murals, installations, and videos. Because their selections were made on aesthetic grounds, they were criticized for de-emphasizing the social and political content inherent in much Hispanic art. The use of the term “Hispanic” was criticized as a term created in the 1970s to conveniently “homogenize” this group of people for governmental and marketing purposes. One of the strongest condemnations of this type of exhibition came from Tomas Ybarra-Frausto (1991), a professor of Spanish and Portuguese literature, who has done extensive research on the history of Chicano art. Although he acknowledged the democratic urge to “validate and recognize diversity,” he claimed that exhibitions of minority art re-affirm the centrality of the Eurocentric canon and relegate minority art to the periphery. Furthermore, he criticized the exhibition because it was not based in the Hispanic community nor did it reflect the political grounding of Hispanic art.

In defense of the exhibition, Peter C. Marzio (1991), the director of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, outlined the obstacles the museum’s curators encountered in organizing the exhibition. These included the dearth of Hispanic curators able or willing to participate in the project; the lack of research on the topic on a national basis; resistance from leaders in the Hispanic arts communities; and apathy on the part of the general public and museum professionals in regard to minority art. While some museum professionals might acknowledge the futility of undertaking an exhibition of this sort for these very reasons, Marzio and his curators remain “dedicated to placing high-quality minority exhibitions in the broad context of general art museums” (p. 124). The issue of who has the right to tell the story of a minority’s art is clearly contentious. The amount
and intensity of the debate generated by the Hispanic art exhibition has provided a forum for deep reflection by museum professionals across the country as evidenced by the Poetics and Politics symposium.

*Voice and Cultural Objects*

The third type of minority exhibition presents cultural objects that were made for ceremonial or utilitarian purposes and never intended to be displayed in museums. This type of exhibition includes African and Native American objects and others representing cultural specificity. Art historian Susan Vogel (1991) is firm in her belief that curators cannot treat objects from other cultures in the authoritative way they treat Western art. She points out, “We are too far from the voices of the original owners and makers, too locked into the perspectives of our own culture to presume to be faithful to the object in any exalted way” (p. 193). At the Center for African Art where Vogel is director, curators have developed several exhibitions that expose the limitations of displaying cultural objects. One exhibition presented African objects with comments by ten different individuals and encouraged the viewer to agree or disagree. The views presented by both Americans and Africans ranged from purely aesthetic responses to in-depth explanations of the objects as religious objects. *Art/artifact* focused on Western styles of exhibiting African art in both art museums and natural history museums. The focus of the exhibition was not the art per se but the exhibition strategies of its presentation. The exhibition emphasized the fact that the western story of African art is often determined by Americans and not Africans. Artist Fred Wilson’s installation, *Mining the Museum* at the Maryland Historical Society in 1992, “troubled” the museum’s integrity and exposed its complicity in ignoring African-American history. Wilson culled
the museums’ storage areas and found damaged, rusted, forgotten objects related to slavery. In the exhibition, he juxtaposed damaged goods such as rusted slave shackles with a pair of shiny, silver goblets. Visitors to the exhibition were forced to think of their own reluctance to confront oppression and fight prejudice in their everyday lives. Examples such as these, which focus on the art of exhibition-making and museum policy, make explicit the political issues surrounding exhibitions (G.E. Hein, 2000).

In his research concerning the displays of Native American art in two large, majority museums and in two small tribal museums in Canada, cultural theorist James Clifford (1991) found that the issue of voice is contested in both types of museums. In the tribal museums, objects are represented with the personal stories of the families that made or owned them, but these stories are often contested by other local families. As a result, the tribal exhibitions can be very confusing for non-native viewers. The majority museums present a more universalized story. During the last 20 years under pressure from native groups, larger institutions have opened their collections to the voices of Native Americans artists and indigenous curators. Clifford suggests that the tribal museums, which also serve as art centers where minority values and customs are practiced and strengthened, have begun to de-center the more universalized narratives of tribal art and customs that are presented in the majority institutions. Clifford’s review of the four museums indicates the presence of many contested voices in the displays in both majority and tribal exhibitions. He concludes that both types of museums have a role to play in telling the stories of native peoples and how they have survived in spite of widespread exploitation, repression, and marginalization. In critiquing the 1984 Museum of Modern Art exhibition, Primitivism in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the
Modern, Clifford pointed to the misrepresentation of African art as mere objects of inspiration in the service of western artists. Clifford (1988) emphasized the need to organize exhibitions that question the boundaries of the art world. “The relations of power,” he wrote, “whereby one portion of humanity can select, value, and collect the pure products of others need to be criticized and transformed” (p. 213).

One of the most outspoken critics of ethnographic exhibitions, British museologist Kenneth Hudson (1991) believes that exhibiting cultures is often superficial, biased, and misleading. In an effort to attract audiences, these exhibitions highlight the exotic and perpetuate myths that misrepresent the cultures as they exist today. Museum exhibitions can easily become museum exploitations when they emphasize traditions like long, outmoded tribal dances, and “encourage a patronizing and escapist attitude toward the people involved” (p. 464). Other anthropologists and folklorists (Boon, 1991; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1991) lament the fragmentary nature of displaying cultural objects in museums. Boon, an anthropologist, admits to being saddened by any museum display and even the idea of the museum itself. Folklore scholar Kirshenblatt-Gimblett thinks of an ethnographic museum as “a tomb with a view” (p. 416). In pointing out that “ethnographic objects are objects of ethnography,” Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1991, p. 387) emphasizes the fact that the cultural objects we place in museums were never meant to be there and that they assume the voice and identity that the ethnographer or curator provides. She focuses on the art of representation and points out that the object itself is not the subject of the viewer’s gaze but rather the manner in which it is displayed. “Exhibitions are fundamentally theatrical,” she explains, “for they are how museums perform the knowledge they create” (p. 2). She distinguishes two types of exhibition...
installations: in situ and in context. In situ installations such as period rooms and dioramas attempt to recreate the environment in which the object was found or used. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett points out that this type of exhibition is never neutral. Rather, it has been constructed by someone or some group and is imprinted with their values. These displays usually portray a sanitized, orderly version of the original.

As curators of *Symphonic Poem*, we made the decision to reconstruct Aminah Robinson’s backyard studio (see Figure 3) in order to help visitors to the exhibition better understand the artist’s working process. Inside the small aluminum-sided structure, Aminah carved the boards for her woodcut prints, wrote in her journals, and assembled some of her three-dimensional sculptures. The space also served as a storage area for many of life-size puppet figures, some of which were in various stages of disrepair. The ramped entrance to the studio was flanked by the artist’s bottle and stone garden and huge iron cooking cauldrons she used to cook “hogmawg,” a sculptural material of mud, sticks, glue, and lime. In discussions with our exhibition designer, Annegreth and I had to make many decisions regarding exactly how to reconstruct the space, whether or not to include the many broken sculptures, wood shavings, fabric scraps, garage-sale treasures, and ubiquitous dust and cobwebs, and how much of the exterior bottle garden to include. In some cases, our decisions were determined by budgetary and space limitations and concerns for visitor safety. Some of our decisions were arbitrary—what fit in the truck and others were aesthetic—we dusted the objects and eliminated the ones that were broken. We constructed a new structure because we determined that moving the original was more costly and we added windows to the studio so that viewers could examine the studio from a variety of angles. The gallery text that accompanied the studio indicated
that the structure was a replica. Because the studio was so crowded with Aminah’s art and working materials, visitors were not permitted to enter the space, but viewed it from the doorway. All of these considerations support Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s conclusions about the limitations of in-situ installations. Because we situated the studio in the middle of a traditional gallery, we hoped that visitors were aware that what they were seeing was a constructed representation. We also included many photographs of the actual studio in the catalogue and made the catalogue available to visitors. Our intent was to provide a representation of Aminah’s working space but it was impossible to do so without some distortion. While the studio was taken out of context and not an exact replica, it provided insight into the artist’s working space and her processes, tools, and materials.

The second type of exhibition that Kirshenblatt-Gimblett defines as in-context is the traditional display that provides the visitor with a “theoretical framework” through labels, text panels, maps, photographs and related programs and exhibition tours. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett concludes that any exhibition is the result of curatorial construction and control. For example, in *Symphonic Poem*, even though we consulted with the artist and used her own words when possible, we curators chose the objects and grouped them into thematic units. We developed the text panels, photographs, extended labels, and musical recordings to provide the visitor with “a theoretical framework.” We did our curatorial work in the hopes that our visitors would linger long enough to be aware of our choices, our categories, and our arrangements and, better yet, to question them and formulate their own responses. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett succeeds in “troubling”
every aspect of museum exhibition, folkloric performance, and cultural festival. As museum workers, we need to make exhibitions as transparent as possible so that visitors are aware of and reflect on the art of representation they are experiencing.

*Family Days*

Museum family days that have become routine events at museums across the country and festivals sponsored by an array of not-for-profit and for-profit organizations appear to be the perfect format to provide active, experiential opportunities for cross-cultural learning and, to a degree, they are. However, these events are far more complex and problematic than they appear. Performers and storytellers are always required to fit into the framework of the sponsoring organization (Bauman & Sawin, 1991). There is always the “potential for confusion, since the participants recognize that they have been hired or commissioned to represent something by relatively well-educated experts who must have some standard in mind, but appear reluctant to articulate it” (p. 296). In contrast with museum exhibitions that present valued fine arts objects arranged by authoritative experts, festivals and family days are examples of popular culture that stem from non-elite environments and beckon all those who attend to participate. While exhibitions tend to universalize cultures through carefully organized thematic categories, festivals and family days particularize them through the individual stories of the presenters (Karp, 1991). Because many people are involved, festivals and family days can lead to “messy events and disorderly, disputatious performances” (p. 284). Like cultural exhibitions, these events raise issues of inclusion and exclusion concerning which aspects of the culture should be represented and who should do the representing. Both the participating artists and the sponsoring organizations must constantly make
decisions regarding the “authenticity” of their materials, processes, and techniques that must often be altered to conform to budgets and to the safety and aesthetic standards of a particular site. A recurring challenge we face at Columbus Museum of Art family days, which are held in conjunction with our major exhibitions, is maintaining a respectful atmosphere for art, artists, storytellers, and performers when hundreds of families attend these popular events. Despite their “messiness,” these efforts are worthwhile because they counter the perceived elitism of museums by creating a relaxed, family-friendly atmosphere that attracts many people to exhibitions who otherwise might not come. In addition, they bring together people of different cultures who otherwise would never meet and provide a safe and pleasant setting for them to speak with one another. Family days provide an opportunity to integrate diverse communities and, at the same time, acknowledge their differences (Hein, H., 2000). In the case of extant cultures such as those involving Native Americans or Buddhists, the family days attest to the ongoing vitality and viability of these cultures.

Audiences and Exhibitions

In addition to those who create the objects and those who develop exhibitions, the visitors who experience them are another important element that forms the poetics and politics of exhibitions. In recent years, as museums have shifted their emphasis from the object to the visitor-object relationship:

Museums still collect objects and still take pride in the size and quality of their collections. They continue to preserve and study objects, but their chief occupation is neither to discover nor to keep them. It is to foster the intersubjective constructions that objects elicit. No longer content to be styled as graveyards or department stores, museums now are cast as impresarios of meaning performances. They have become manufacturers of experience (H. Hein, 2000, p.65).
This phenomenological shift encourages visitors to make meaning through subjective reflection and intersubjectivity. It is in this moment, when their own experiences intersect with others that they “engage like gears” (Merleau-Ponty, 2004). Museum strategies that encourage successful visitor experiences include attention to comfort, providing opportunities for social interaction, and empowering the visitor through self-initiated inquiry (Gurian, 1991; Hein, G., 1998). Today, museum workers use technological advances such as cell phones and blogs to encourage visitors to comment on objects and exhibitions and share their ideas with other visitors and even with people who never step foot in the museum. Many factors contribute to this museum-audience relationship including the type of museum, the personalities of the director and staff, and the design of exhibitions. Museum educator Elaine Gurian maintains that the exhibitions that are most appealing to audiences are those that elicit an emotional response, are non-linear, and offer free choice learning. Experimenting with innovative labels, text, learning activities, and technology and testing them with visitors are successful methodologies museums can use to empower visitors. H. Hein (2000), an associate professor of philosophy and author of Exploratorium: The Museum as Laboratory (Smithsonian Institution Press, 1990), describes this type of museum in which the visitor is included in the dialogue as a “center for inquiry” in which the objects are the stimulus for experience.

Conclusions

Museums have a long history of reform in this country. Harris (1999) suggests that for a long time the reforms were sporadic and not bold enough and museums constituted a “self-enclosed world, clearly defined by hierarchies of prestige and privilege, visited by largely traditional audiences, and promulgating an ideal of self-
restraint in their display of art, history, science, and culture” (p. 38). Beginning in the late 1960s, museums were propelled by both the crisis of static and declining finances and a mood of social protest to re-examine their very identities. Harris notes that with the exception of governance and staffing, museums have changed dramatically:

American museums today, building on the last several decades, claim new and unprecedented levels of user-friendly programs. They are active suitors of new audiences, they partner with a variety of civic and cultural organizations, they welcome gifts and exhibitions of classes of objects they once dismissed as irrelevant or unimportant, they tackle themes that are socially relevant and court controversy, and they promote and merchandize themselves with impressive aggressiveness (p. 38).

Museums are not about to back down from these initiatives that have made them important centers for social discourse and have increased and diversified their audiences. Rather, they continue to reflect on and confront issues like those raised in the Poetics and Politics symposium, and, as a result, alter their agendas and strategies. In a continuing effort to improve the representation of minority art, Lavine and Karp (1991) recommend that the museum world support institutions that encourage minorities to control their own representation; strengthen the expertise of established museums in presenting minority exhibitions; and facilitate the expression of multiple points of view in the presentation of minority exhibitions. As a postscript to the controversy surrounding Houston’s Hispanic art exhibition in the 1980s, the museum now has established an International Center for the Art of the Americas and has on its staff a curator of Latin American art. Rather than shying away from the politics of Hispanic art as the museum was criticized for doing previously, it has recently organized an exhibition devoted specifically to the political art of Central and South America that has been praised as “stirring throughout” and “revelatory in part” (Cotter, 2004).
British sociologist Stuart Hall (2000) frequently explores issues of cultural identity and emphasizes the danger of essentializing cultures:

Cultural identity is a matter of “becoming” as well as of “being.” It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something that already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being fixed in some essentialized past, they are subject to the continuous “play” of history, culture and power (p. 23).

When museums exhibit anything, but especially when they exhibit the art of minority cultures, they should welcome and encourage a multiplicity of voices, and especially, those from the culture that is being represented. With a living, contemporary artist such as Aminah Robinson who is willing to share her story, the responsibility of exhibition makers is to guarantee that she is heard. With a group exhibition or an exhibition of cultural objects, the task is exceedingly more difficult. Determining what story should be told and whose voices should be heard is always contentious and never neutral. When “displaying cultures,” the museum’s responsibility is to communicate to their visitors the limitations of representation.
CHAPTER 3

AMINAH BRENDA LYNN ROBINSON: A PORTRAIT

The purpose of this chapter is to introduce Aminah Brenda Lynn Robinson (see Figure 1), the artist whose life and work, is the basis for the retrospective exhibition which is at the core of my case study. The portrait of Aminah I present is my attempt to help others better understand her and thus better understand the development and presentation of the exhibition and the responses to her work that I discuss in Chapter 4. This portrait method of examination is personal and sympathetic and also tough and scrutinizing (Lightfoot, 1983). It is an example of cultural translation (Stuhr, Krug, & Scott, 1995) in which I attempt to help others understand the artist by creating a space for her voice. Cultural translation attempts to “record, transcribe, and translate conversations about issues the artists see as important and relevant” (p. 38). It is a fluid type of research in which the dynamics of shared conversations and experiences of the artist and the researcher guide the direction of the story. This portrait of her is also a documentation of my own journey and the understandings I have gained as a result of our relationship. The portrait is filtered and negotiated because I have made decisions about what to include and what to omit and what to highlight and what to leave in the shadows. The larger story is mediated based on my understanding of Aminah’s work and words and the need to have a beginning and end to the portrait. Stuhr et al. (1995) describe this outcome as a

3 A portion of the biographical material in this portrait is based on my previously published essay, “A Different Walk” (Genshaft, 2002).
“partial tale,” “small fragments” of a “richly woven tapestry” that is the result of both the artist’s and the researcher’s individual perspectives (p. 40). Whenever possible, I include Aminah’s own observations. However, I am aware that in painting this picture of Aminah, I am, as Alcoff (1995, p. 101) maintains, “participating in the construction” of my subject rather than simply revealing Aminah’s true self.

The portrait also emerges through the lens of critical race theory (CRT) and feminism. Critical race theorists hold that racism in America is so prevalent that it is generally accepted. They seek to counter this situation by various interpretive strategies. One of these is storytelling (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Rohmann, 1999). Aminah is a storyteller who attempts to negate racism by depicting a world in which people of color are the norm. In doing so, she defines who she is rather than having others define her. Aminah has carefully preserved her stories and those of her elders in her art. These stories might never have been heard otherwise. Feminist writer P.H. Collins (2000) emphasizes the need for black women to set their own agendas and speak for themselves. Aminah has been doing this all of her adult life. By analyzing the content of her work, I emphasize her alignment with black feminists who seek to encourage self-definition and empowerment of oppressed black women.

At the time in 1989 when I first visited Aminah Brenda Lynn Robinson, I lived about five minutes away from her home and studio and yet, I had never been down her street. Her home is in the Shepherd community on the east side of Columbus, Ohio. Until she mentioned this name, I had never heard of the neighborhood. In retrospect, this ability to make people aware of the neighborhoods and communities they pass by everyday and might not notice is essential to understanding Aminah and her work. The
houses on her street are small but, for the most part, well maintained. Aminah’s house stands out for a number of reasons. Since 1974, when she purchased the house, she has marked both the inside and outside of it as her own. Some of the buttons that she carefully applies to much of her work seemed to have escaped and are wedged between the bricks and bottles she has placed in her front yard to discourage the growth of anything resembling grass or weeds. The irony of her bottle garden is that somehow healthy looking plant life has managed to grow inside the bottles. Encased in the bottles, the greenery does not require cutting or weeding. Securely embedded in between the bricks are two metal wagon wheels (see Figure 4), one larger than the other. What I did not realize, at the time when I first approached the house, is that both the wheels and the bottle garden relate to African cosmology in which the living and the souls of the dead are intertwined and never separated. The wheel represents four equidistant points on the circumference of a circle: birth, maturity, death, and ancestral spirit. These are the “four stages of a soul’s journey around the wheel of existence—the cosmogram” (Austin, 2002, p. 55).

The garden relates specifically to the Kongo tradition of placing bottles on graves to ward off evil and protect the spirit of the deceased. In a related custom, families hang pottery or glass from trees to honor the spirits of the deceased and to protect their households from evil. In the Caribbean and the American south, examples of these types of gardens have existed since the late 1700s (Thompson, 1984). Later, when I asked Aminah about her garden, she told me that her father and her uncle Alvin had had one, stating “everyone had a bottle garden” (A. Robinson, personal communication, March 15, 2002). In fact, she had written about her uncle’s bottle garden in a limited edition book:
Milk bottles, medicine bottles, root beer bottles, pickled [sic] feet jars, vinegar and mustard jars—every kind of jar imaginable, they planted! All around and underneath the jars the family planted dandelion, sunflower, and rhubarb seeds.... Wild flowers, weeds, and grass grew up inside the bottles while ants, grasshoppers, and ladybugs clung to the sides of the jars. Community people would visit their backyard to see their Bottle Garden. Year after year of every season their Bottle Garden grew more and more beautiful—creating music out of rainbows in the midday sun... (Robinson, 2001, p. 8)

Like the objects in Aminah’s yard, the round bundles, which she makes from scraps of cloth or plastic and affixes to many of her cloth pieces, represent the eternal presence of ancestors. The bundles are related to similar bundles or packets known as minkisi in Africa. They contain medicines and other objects such as bits of glass, buttons, threads, pottery shards, and human hair. The packets are believed to have the spark of a soul which gives them power to direct spirits, to diagnose problems, to heal, and to foretell the future (Thompson, 1984; Leone & Fry, 1999). This view of the world in which life and death; the past, present, and future; Africa and America; and the spiritual and physical realms are never separated is key to understanding Aminah and her work.

In addition to the striking appearance of Aminah’s house, its location is significant as well. The Shepherd community is just east of the Mt.Vernon Avenue neighborhood and business district that flourished as the center of African American life in Columbus from the early 1900s until it became the object of urban renewal in the 1960s. Poindexter Village, one of the nation’s first federally funded housing complexes where Aminah spent the first 17 years of her life, is located in this area. Her art is grounded in her memories of growing up there and in the stories she lovingly recorded from her Uncle Alvin Zimmerman, her mother’s oldest sibling and only brother. His
stories included those about growing up in the Blackberry Patch, the area that was razed to make way for Poindexter Village, as well as those handed down to him about the farmlands that existed even before the Blackberry Patch. Aminah believes these old neighborhoods are hallowed by the presence of the ancestors and that the transmission of the stories to future generations through her work is a sacred obligation.

When I entered Aminah’s house on that first day, none of this was clear to me. I was familiar with some of Aminah’s work and drawn to its color and energy. I thought it was a celebration of life as Aminah knew it. What I began to realize after that first morning we spent together and what I continue to learn through our relationship is that Aminah’s work is colorful, energetic and a celebration of life, but it is also the documentation of the artist’s sacred journey. All aspects of her work including buttons, bottle gardens, neighborhoods, and her elders’ stories are complex, multivalent, and layered with meaning.

My first visit to Aminah’s home was the result of my responsibility as an educator at the Columbus Museum of Art. In my role at the time, I had the opportunity to write the brochure for an exhibition of Aminah’s work entitled Pages in History in 1989. Since that time, I have worked closely with Aminah. During the organization of Symphonic Poem, her retrospective exhibition that opened at the Columbus Museum of Art in fall 2002, I interviewed her approximately two days per week for a period of eight months. We then worked together on the national tour of the exhibition which ended in May 2007. Currently, I speak with Aminah or see her several times each week as we continue to plan exhibitions, a Web site, and a study center devoted to her work which is part of the plans for expansion at the Columbus Museum of Art in 2010. We have traveled together to
exhibition openings in Brooklyn, Tacoma, Toledo, and Santiago, Chile. We have celebrated birthdays and holidays together, and searched for antiques and “old stuff” at country flea markets. Prior to establishing this close working relation and friendship with Aminah, I had met her briefly at the museum and like most people, I was struck by her physical appearance and warm demeanor. She has a regal bearing and although she is slender, her presence commands attention. She is, in fact, extremely thin and since 1999, she has shaved her head causing people to constantly inquire about her health. Although she has had her share of respiratory ailments, she is in general good health and maintains the athletic flexibility of someone much younger than her 67 years. Her large engaging smile seems to dominate her face which is framed by five gold hoops in each ear. The hoops belonged to her grandmother and she has been wearing the earrings since her grandmother’s death in 1968. Equally striking are her large, brown eyes that focus on the individuals she meets in a way that blocks out any background distractions and creates an aura of great importance around the encounters at hand. In a word, she is charming and because she put me ease on that first day, she and I developed a rapport that we have continued to share.

Aminah has also marked the inside of her house. She has decorated the front of her white kitchen cabinets with heavy black outlines of human and animal figures and she has carved and painted most of the doors in the house, and even the floors in some areas. Everywhere there are shelves and secondhand Victorian cabinets packed with books, catalogues, and news and magazine clippings. The walls are filled with many awards and honorary degrees Aminah has received and works of art she has exchanged with other artists. Collections of carved wooden canes and walking sticks, of sweet grass baskets, of
handmade dolls, and of thimbles from all over the world create a visual patchwork throughout the first floor rooms in the house. Even though I have visited often, I am still captivated by the colorful spectacle that is Aminah’s home. Sweetie, Aminah’s large, long-haired black loveable mutt never leaves her side and somehow manages to navigate the narrow passageways that wind from room to room. Each and every room of the first floor and basement serve as studio space. Aminah’s bed is the living room couch she shares with the dog. A huge treelike sculpture continues to “grow” in the kitchen and leaves just enough room for Aminah to access the refrigerator, sink, and microwave oven. The second floor is art storage and a small closet-like room with shelves that Aminah calls her writing room. While the amount of stuff is overwhelming, Aminah seems to know the exact location of every item. When I ask her about an early exhibition brochure, or an out-of-print book, or an old family photograph, she can find it immediately. Her home is her sanctuary and it is imbued with the same spiritual quality that her work radiates.

Early Years

On February 18, 1940, Brenda Lynn Robinson, was born to Leroy Edward William Robinson and Helen Zimmerman Robinson in Columbus, Ohio. Later the same year, the family moved to apartment F, in the newly constructed Poindexter Village complex on the near east side of the city. Among the “first families” to move into new complex, the Robinsons became part of the lively, close-knit community where all the adults knew and kept track of all the children. Brenda Lynn, who would later take the name “Aminah” during a trip to Africa in 1979, became intrigued with Poindexter and the stories she heard from her elders of the neighborhood that preceded it, the Blackberry
Patch. These neighborhoods were home to an intriguing array of characters who captured the young artist’s imagination and became recurring themes in her work. She carefully observed every detail of the Sockman, Chickenfoot Woman, Cameraman, Trainman, Iceman, and Ragman, who peddled their wares on the street and of the Crowman, who always had a story to tell. Time and again, these figures appear in her drawings, sculptures, paintings, and in all types of one-of-a-kind, limited edition, and published books. As she grew older, Aminah remained devoted to celebrating these figures and chronicling the long-forgotten communities they represented.

When she was still a toddler, Aminah’s father taught her how to make pulp by combining water with natural materials and whatever used paper was available. After stomping out the water with their feet, Aminah and her dad laid the mixture out to dry. Depending on the ingredients, the final product varied in texture and color —sometimes resembling thick, dark brown leather and sometimes delicate, pastel paper. The elder Robinson showed his young daughter how to assemble the pages to make books. Because of this early and constant exposure, Aminah developed a great respect for books and a passion for reading and collecting them. All kinds of books, including those that scroll, pop up, and fold like an accordion, became vehicles for her art. When she did not have enough money to buy art materials, Aminah used the end pages from published books as another source of paper for pen and ink and charcoal drawings. Aminah believes that these “Manuscript Pages,” as she calls the drawings, are sacred because they come from books that she treasured. She has created books of all kinds: bound limited edition woodcuts, one-of-a-kind button and bead encrusted journals, and published stories she illustrated and/or authored.
Another material Aminah learned to make with her father is *hogmawg*, her word for a mixture of mud, clay, sticks, pig grease, lime, and glue. After the mixture is cooked on the stove, Aminah uses it to model three-dimensional sculptures and to add texture to two-dimensional paintings on cloth. At the heart of the processes she learned from her father was a lesson that became a way of life. Sticks, leaves, mud, dyes from fruits, vegetables, roots, and pulp from recycled paper are art materials that are everywhere and always available.

Aminah’s father also taught his young daughter to “to do penetrations.” First, he instructed her to look around her. Then, he put the side of his hand down the middle of her face, told her to close her eyes, and describe what she had seen in as much detail as possible. Time and again after she recited her general perceptions of the scene, he told her to keep trying until she was able to capture every minute detail. By practicing this exercise repeatedly, Aminah developed the capacity to absorb the complexity of her surroundings through all of her senses, to organize them mentally, and to recall them with computer-like precision.

To support his family, Robinson held down several jobs including one as a custodian with the Columbus Public schools for many years. Although he did not consider himself an artist, in the eyes of his daughter, he was her most revered art teacher. He believed that what others might call art was something as natural and ordinary as breathing or eating. Her father’s example probably accounts for Aminah’s frequent insistence that she isn’t an artist, that what she does is “just a way of walking.” In addition to teaching her art skills, which Aminah has relied on throughout her career, her father understood her need to create in her own way, and he supported her when
others, especially her mother, did not understand her artistic drive. “If it had not been for my father,” she explained, “I don’t think I would have made it through” (A. Robinson, personal communication, August 30, 2001) and “I was extremely close to my father. He allowed me the freedom, in spite of anything else, to create and to work, and to continue” (A. Robinson, personal communication October 15, 2001). Aminah’s first studio was under her bed in the room she shared with her sister Sue who was two years older and with her sister Sharon who was three years younger. In this private space, she guarded the art supplies that her father gave her and the drawings and paintings she created. Like her father, she adopted the habit of always carrying a sketchpad and pencil. Long after her father died, Aminah discovered that he carefully had saved over two thousand pieces of her childhood artwork.

Both Aminah’s sisters went to Catholic schools, but Aminah insisted on attending public school. She had heard of or seen students have their knuckles rapped with a ruler and decided this approach to classroom management was not for her. On several occasions, she actually ran away from the Catholic school in which she had been enrolled. Her parents finally relented and she began attending Mt.Vernon Avenue School, a Columbus Public school about ten steps from her family’s Poindexter apartment. This act of childhood determination foreshadowed the independent thinking she would display later in life. During her elementary school years, she entered a Thanksgiving drawing contest sponsored by one of the local television stations. Ceremoniously, her father drove the entire family to the main post office to deliver her entry before the midnight deadline. When the colorful turkey she had drawn was selected as the winning entry, she was invited to appear on television to receive the prize—a black-and-gray puppy she
named “Charcoal.” The dog received special permission to live in Poindexter, which had a no-pet policy, and became Aminah’s constant companion. Throughout her grade-school years, Aminah’s father continued to encourage her art. He introduced her to Columbus painters Emerson Burkhart and Roman Johnson so that she could meet some “real” artists, and she often sketched alongside of them when they set up their easels on the street. Later when she was in art school, she recalled that both of them came to her house to see her work and when her mother questioned some of the work Aminah was doing, Burkhart said, “She’s doing just fine. She’s finding her way. She’s an artist” (A. Robinson, personal communication, August 30. 2001).

After attending Pilgrim School for the seventh grade and then Franklin Junior High for the eighth and ninth grades, Aminah graduated from East High School in 1957, after only two and a half years. During high school, she discovered Leonardo and Rembrandt and they became important “mentors” as she honed her drawing skills. On the advice of her junior high art teacher, she began taking lessons on Saturdays at the Columbus Art School (now the Columbus College of Art and Design). While in high school, a poster Aminah made for the Tuberculosis Society was exhibited in a group show at the Columbus Gallery of Fine Arts (now the Columbus Museum of Art). Her social life revolved around the “Jolly Teens,” a group she formed with five of her best girlfriends. The teens volunteered at community events, arranged small tea parties, and appeared together in public wearing “their” colors--turquoise and yellow. During Aminah’s 2002 retrospective exhibition at the museum, these lifelong friends, minus one who had passed away, met for a laughter-filled lunch and a tour of the exhibition.
Like many of the women in Poindexter, Aminah’s mother, Helen Elizabeth Zimmerman Robinson, was a strong, no-nonsense person who established rules that she expected her three daughters to follow unquestioningly. Directly across the street from the Robinson’s apartment was the irresistible temptation of the Beatty Recreation Center and its art instructor, Mrs. Bray, who supplied the nascent artist with the materials and space to paint and draw. Frequently, when she was only three or four years old and supposed to be taking a nap, Aminah found her way to the recreation center by climbing out the apartment’s second-floor bathroom window and lowering herself to the ground by way of a downspout. When her mother found out about these escapades, Aminah was spanked and forced to recite innumerable Hail Marys, the Catholic prayer to the Virgin Mary seeking forgiveness. In addition to the “tough love” her Mrs. Robinson practiced, she also taught her daughter the family traditions of spinning, sewing, crocheting, and button work. In the same way that her father used scraps and leftovers to make drawings and books, her mother taught her young daughter to value cloth remnants and buttons from old clothing. With this knowledge, Aminah never lacked for art materials no matter how desperate her financial situation. Somewhat reluctantly, Helen Robinson recognized her young daughter’s talents and thought that there was nothing unusual about her five-year-old’s practice of visiting the nearby C.D. White and Son Funeral Home to draw from the bodies.

Although Aminah’s mother believed that it was not appropriate for young children to have lengthy conversations with their elders, Aminah’s father arranged for his daughter to spend hours each week with his aunt Cornelia Johnson, the eldest of his mother’s nine sisters and brothers. Aminah developed an important relationship with
Aunt Cornelia, a former slave who provided a link to the family’s ancestral roots in Angola and the experience of the Middle Passage. Aunt Cornelia was affectionately called “Big Annie” and also went by the African name of Themba. She told Aminah that she had been captured as a child, taken from her home in Angola, and forced to endure the horror of the Atlantic passage. She showed Aminah the brand on her chest that she received when she was sold into slavery. She recounted her early childhood as a slave in Sapelo Island, Georgia, the emancipation period, and the family’s subsequent migration to Columbus through Dayton, Tennessee. From the time Aminah was a young child until she was 17, when Aunt Cornelia died at age 105, the aspiring artist visited her great aunt regularly at her home on the south side of Columbus. There she recorded in copious notes and detailed drawings the stories Cornelia told. Besides providing Aminah with the subject matter for some of her most significant work, including Dad’s Journey (see Figure 5), her great aunt also gave her niece remnants of a slave quilt that Aminah has treasured and has incorporated with great reverence in what she considers her most important rag paintings and RagGonNons. In Dad’s Journey, Aminah records Aunt Cornelia’s account of the Robinson family’s horrific Atlantic crossing from Africa to enslavement on Sapelo Island, Georgia, and then the migration north after emancipation. In an accordion book (see Figure 6) that is one component of Dad’s Journey, Aminah depicts graphically those who chose to jump overboard or even throw their children into the sea rather than become slaves in America.

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4 The period between the 15th and the 19th centuries when millions of African people were transported as “human cargo” across the Atlantic in the holds of ships from West Africa to enslavement in the Americas.
A *RagGonNon* is Aminah’s word for a whole category of works that come in many forms but are usually large, painted fabric constructions embellished with buttons, beads, threads, spirit figures of tufted cloth, music boxes, and found objects. She thinks of their physical structure as complex, multi-layered pop-up books akin to the published pop-up books which are commercially available and which she collects. She attaches pockets and fills them with scrolled and accordion-folded books and cloth dolls decorated with African beads, costume jewelry, and shells. Circular pouches with button or shell eyes imbue the RagGonNon with ancestral spirits. The RagGonNons, the result of years of work, tell Aminah’s cherished stories of close family members, Columbus’ African American neighborhoods, the long, proud history of African Americans, and the journeys she has taken to other parts of the world such as Israel and Chile. “RagGonNon,” the word Aminah invented, embodies the concept of talking or “ragging on and on” and its physical design echoes this idea. When she finishes working on one section, she attaches another piece of cloth with needle and thread. As she adds more and more sections, she rolls the RagGonNon up like a scroll and, in the process, is unaware of its length. For Aminah, these works are “resolved” but never finished because those who view them are constantly bringing new ideas to them. “We don’t know where it’s going to go,” explains Aminah, “and we don’t know who is going to be inspired and who is not….It’s taking on another life—its own life” (A. Robinson, personal communication, March 15, 2002).

Similar to the literary device of stream of consciousness writing, the RagGonNons present a constant flow of memories, thoughts, feelings, and expressions that encourage the viewer to respond. Aminah’s RagGonNons, in particular, and all of her work in general, are visual parallels to the African oral tradition of call and response. The use of
dialogue as a means of connecting people is rooted in African culture and is based on the principle that everyone in a community must participate to validate an idea (P.H. Collins, 2000). When Aminah insists that her work is for the future, she is hoping this dialogue will continue and that young people will respond to her work with their own voices.

A RagGonNon is a challenge to display. Its format defies traditional notions of art that fits in a frame or sits on a pedestal. For Aminah’s retrospective exhibition, *Symphonic Poem*, two of the RagGonNons each required more than 50 running feet of space and custom-designed platforms. When we organized the national tour of the exhibition, we were forced to eliminate one of the RagGonNons because some of the venues did not have enough space. The conundrum these pieces present is that Aminah wants them to be seen, studied, and responded to but they are very difficult to exhibit. This highly original art form may require an innovative type of museum architecture, for example, one with long tube-like tunnels in which visitors can ride a moving walkway to examine every inch of each RagGonNon.

Aminah’s relationship with Alvin Zimmerman, her mother’s brother, was equally important as the one she had with her aunt Cornelia. Beginning in 1943, when she was only three years old, and continuing until his death in 1990, Uncle Alvin repeated over and over again colorful stories from the Blackberry Patch and Poindexter that Aminah carefully transcribed by hand in her journals. Many of these stories became the basis for the characters and animal fables that inhabit Aminah’s drawings, cloth paintings, and sculptures, and they are the subject of several limited-edition books including *Thorn Alley: The Blackberry Patch*, and *The Sidewalks of Market Street*. 
Aminah’s relationships with Uncle Alvin and Aunt Cornelia had a profound effect on her development both as an artist and a person. She has brought to life the stories of Uncle Alvin and Aunt Cornelia with missionary zeal. Despite her mother’s disapproval, Aminah succeeded in spending hours absorbing and treasuring the words of her uncle and her great aunt. With her father’s encouragement, Aminah developed an enduring respect for history and the past, for her elders and ancestors, and for her belief in ancestral spirits that are always present.

Inevitably, as Aminah became an adolescent she clashed with her mother, who expected her daughters to do their chores and keep their opinions to themselves. Dating was not encouraged. Aminah’s account of her relationship with her mother typifies the way some African-American mothers attempted to shield their children from the hurtfulness they themselves had encountered in society outside their own communities. Writer Rosalie Troester discusses the tendency of African-American women to protect their daughters:

Black mothers, particularly those with strong ties to their community, sometimes build high banks around their young daughters, isolating them from the dangers of the larger world until they are old and strong enough to function as autonomous women…. This isolation causes the currents between Black mothers and daughters to run deep and the relationship to be fraught with an emotional intensity often missing from the lives of women with more freedom. (Troester as cited in Collins, 2000, p. 186).

In recalling her childhood and adolescence, Aminah repeatedly refers to her tumultuous relationship with her mother. While her father was strict with her as well, he was the shining light in her life because he understood the creative path on which she had embarked.
The year she graduated from high school, the family left Poindexter Village and moved farther east to a house on Dartmouth Avenue. Aminah began attending regular classes at the Columbus Art School. She became immersed in her work: “I couldn’t get enough of art school. It was a completely different world that I lived in day in and day out” (A. Robinson, personal communication, February 7, 2007). Working each night into the early hours of the morning and waking before dawn to continue, she developed the rigorous schedule that she has maintained ever since. Fueled by her love of books, she began experimenting with combining text and visual images. Her work from this period includes traditional art school exercises that are often accompanied by expressive poetry and musings about the meaning of life and especially the meaning of life for a young, black woman. Soon thereafter, she included written narratives directly within the work of art—a practice that has remained integral to her art. By including straightforward, written descriptions that supply context concerning her subject matter, she communicates directly with the viewer.

Civil Rights, Black Power, and Feminism

Aminah was inspired by the consciousness-raising movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Both blacks and feminists championed the idea of activist art—art that can bring about social change. In preparation for Symphonic Poem, the retrospective exhibition of Aminah’s work at the museum, I began researching the historical and social context which Aminah experienced as a young artist and which impacted her voice as a mature artist. Aminah generously loaned me many of the books that had been important to her in this early period. The passages that she carefully underlined and the many notes that she wrote in the margins of the books have provided me with striking insights into her
thinking at the time and demonstrate the great effect the Civil Rights and black power movements and feminism had on her art. For example, in *The Negro in 20th Century America: A Reader on the Struggle for Civil Rights* (Franklin & Starr, 1967), Aminah underlined the following passage in an essay by James Baldwin:

> I am, then, both visibly and legally the descendent of slaves in a white Protestant country, and this is what it means to be an American Negro, this is who he is—a kidnapped pagan who was sold like an animal and treated like one, who was once defined by the American Constitution as ‘three fifths of a man’… (1964, p.475).

Aminah was an active member of civil rights organizations such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). In August 1963, she took a bus with a church group from Columbus to participate in the March on Washington, where Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered his “I have a dream” speech. More than 40 years later in a RagGonNon she “resolved” in 2007, Aminah included the emboldened words “We all the people” in an effort to remind us of the Constitution’s original intent and to re-write it in her own terms. In the 1960s, Aminah was well aware of the efforts of black activists to gain political power and establish black pride through identification with African and African American culture and history. In a 1968 edition of Carter G. Woodson’s *The African Background Outlined* (originally published in 1936), Aminah marked and noted almost the entire chapter entitled “African Survivals in America.” She underlined in red ink, passages about Africans’ love of justice, their conjurers and secret societies that cared for
those in need, and their rich folklore such as the tales of Brer Rabbit⁵, the trickster character who was able to outwit his enemies.

Most telling of all are Aminah’s extensive notes written in 1972 on the pages of Cedric Dover’s *American Negro Art*. When this book was written in 1960, it was one of the first surveys of African-American art. Time and again Aminah underlined and drew boxes around passages declaring that the most successful art grows out of the artist’s life experiences. “Universal art does not arise from the intention to be universal,” wrote Dover, “it is sifted out of deeply rooted community art” (p. 32). In red ink, she circled a passage about the value of art to the community that inspired it:

[Artists] were relieving the burdens of living; they were chronicling, interpreting, and sometimes transforming. In doing so, they were meeting the needs of their own people—and the ultimate test of any work of art is its value to the society in which it is produced, not its reception by the coteries as amusing, exotic, exciting, interesting, original or universal (p. 32).

Aminah also noted Dover’s chastisement of artists like Edward Bannister who chose to live in Europe and paint biblical scenes rather than scenes of “his own people.” This perspective on the importance of creating a black aesthetic resonated with Aminah. In the bottom margin of one page, she wrote, “One cannot separate the artist from what the artist ‘is.’ From his birth and from the roots which gave it.” Even when she traveled far from home, Aminah created art that was grounded in what she knew best—the old Columbus neighborhoods and her family’s stories about them. In addition to pouring over the ideas presented in Dover’s book, Aminah, who was 32 years old at the time, must

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have been concerned with her own artistic progress at her age, because next to every photograph of a dated work of art, she carefully calculated the age of the artist at that particular time.

Although the feminist movement has been criticized for ignoring the concerns of African-American women (P.H. Collins, 2000), both black and white feminist artists shared an interest in promoting types of art that had been previously dismissed as craft such as needlework and ceramics and using their work to rescue the stories of women who otherwise had been erased from history. African-American artists had the additional burden of dealing with issues of racism and classism. “For Robinson, as for many of these artists,” writes art historian and critic Leslie King-Hammond, “creating ways of seeing beauty in black bodies, life, history, culture, and experience is as much a labor of love as an act of resistance to the dehumanization of the spirit and personhood” (2002, p. 46). Many examples of Aminah’s work focus on African-American women—the famous and not-so-famous—at work in their homes and gardens, gossiping with friends, arm in arm with their mothers, and tending to their children. Her cloth paintings, one-of-a-kind books, and mud sculptures are encrusted with objects associated with women: buttons, music boxes, beads, and lace.

In a paperback copy of Alice Walker’s *In Search of Our Mothers’s Gardens* (1983), Aminah marked many passages about the erasure of women’s voices in the past, “And so our mothers and grandmothers have, more often anonymously than not, handed on the creative spark, the seed of the flower they themselves never hoped to see or like a sealed letter they could not plainly read” (p. 240). These words seem to anticipate Aminah’s *Clutch of Blossoms* series which she created in the early 1990s and in which
she celebrates women. In the RagGonNon, *Precious Memories* (1972-2002) (see Figure 7), Aminah honors her mother and the community of women who worked hard to raise their children. The buttons so prevalent in Aminah’s work pay homage to her mother and to the button work tradition her mother “‘passed on’ to her. In some of her earliest work, women are the figurative embodiment of old African-American spirituals (see Figure 8) and in her recent *Along Water Street* series, she depicts a powerful female shaman. The strength, creativity, and cleverness of women is a recurring theme in her work.

Documenting the Past

When she was in art school, Aminah began working at the Columbus Public Library on Grant Street (now the Columbus Metropolitan Library), first on the bookmobile, then in the children’s department, and eventually in the fine arts department. Dividing her time between the Columbus Art School and the library just a few blocks away was, for Aminah, the best of two worlds: “I lived in art and books, and it was at this time that something seemed to click. It was meant for me to have that job” (A. Robinson, personal communication, September 1, 2001). Through her cataloging responsibilities and other duties at the library, Aminah discovered the documents, maps, city directories, and photographs that provided the information she would use in her art. She used the information from these resources to revive Columbus communities that no longer exist, such as the Blackberry Patch, Sellsville, and Water Street. Nonfiction accounts, old newspapers, and slave interviews provided the factual information for drawings, paintings, and sculptures about dozens of African-American writers, musicians, inventors, and civil rights leaders, both the well known and the obscure.
Aminah’s pursuit of historical and geographical detail also led her to the Ohio Historical Society and to the maps available through the county and city government offices.

Aminah is committed to remembering and recovering her past, the stories of her ancestors, and the collective past of African-American communities. “For Robinson,” writes art historian Leslie King-Hammond (2002), “memory is about biography and autobiography, history and genealogy, survival and triumph. Memory is composed of many fragmented elements that are given symbols, meanings, and codes to help us remember why they are important” (p. 48). Aminah’s goal is to recover memories and combine them into a common history that will help those who see her work better understand the past. Her work frequently deals with Africa before slavery, the Middle Passage, slavery and freedom, and the migration North. These events are intertwined with more recent, sometimes personal events. She said of Dad’s Journey (see Figures 5 and 6), a memorial to her father,

It’s about the nightmare of the Atlantic slave trade and the experiences of African people who reached the shores of America. It’s about having to deal with racism and discrimination. It’s about surviving, in spite of all of this. This piece not only represents my relationship with my dad but also with my own people and what happened to us” (as cited in Columbus Museum of Art, 2002, p. 78).

In large cloth paintings she calls “memory maps,” Aminah carefully records every detail of a particular neighborhood. For example, in documenting Sellsville, she created a memory map of the circus community that had its winter quarters in Columbus at the turn of the last century. Sellsville Memory Map (see Figure 11) includes in minute detail all the performers, animal pits, buildings that housed the workers, and shops and businesses that supported the circus. When these works were exhibited in Symphonic Poem, many visitors remembered these old neighborhoods and shared their stories with others during
tours and with the artist when she happened to be in the Museum. “I just enjoy digging up old communities that are no longer there,” noted Aminah (as cited in Columbus Museum of Art, 2002) about this work, “…I feel it is very important to bring those communities out. They existed. And there are many more communities that are no longer around that are colorful and really should be excavated and brought back to life” (p. 97).

Time and again in public and private conversations, Aminah explains that her work is purposeful because it is for the future. She believes that every child deserves the type of grounding in family and community history that she has experienced. Her intent is that her work be the grounding for those who have no grounding and for others who do, her work be the inspiration which causes them to document their own stories. She believes the purpose of her work is to help others understand the past so that they are empowered to go on.

Difficult Times

Aminah longed to live independently in her own apartment, but pressure from her parents to remain living at home until she married made this impossible. Her marriage to Clarence Robinson (no relation to the artist) was propelled by her desire to escape the narrow confines of her childhood home when she turned 21. Clarence was an Air Force veteran of the Korean War and 15 years older than Aminah. For three years, they maintained a relationship through correspondence, since he was stationed in Europe. When he came home in May 1964, he brought Aminah a ring and asked her parents for her hand. That fall, following Clarence’s conversion to Catholicism, the couple was married in a large wedding at Saint Dominic’s near Poindexter Village. Soon after the
wedding, Clarence’s Air Force obligations took the couple to Boise, Idaho; on to Omaha, Nebraska; and then to Biloxi, Mississippi, where their son Sydney was born in 1967.

In 1968, Clarence was sent to Vietnam and Aminah and Sydney stayed with her parents in Columbus. When Clarence returned, the artist and her son accompanied him to Puerto Rico, the location of his next Air Force assignment. In Puerto Rico, Aminah took to the streets, where she spent much of her time sketching the lively neighborhoods of San Juan. She recorded her memories of Poindexter Village in pen and ink and created a series of drawings with ink and natural dyes that were inspired by the spirituals she loved to listen to at home. This practice of creating both work about home and work about the place that she visited became a pattern Aminah would follow throughout her career: “Anytime I go anywhere, there are always two bodies of work--one coming out of Columbus, Ohio, and the other is from the place I am” (A. Robinson, personal communication, August 30, 2001).

Soon after returning from Puerto Rico in 1971, Aminah separated from Clarence. The coincidence of having the same last names would turn out to be one of the few things the couple had in common. Their relationship had gradually deteriorated because of the frequent moves, many of them accompanied by Clarence’s mother, who shared a serious drinking problem with her son. Aminah and Sydney moved to her parent’s house, and after a protracted and fruitless search for a permanent position, she took a summer job as an assistant at the Ohio State Fair’s fine arts exhibition.

In 1968, during the period when she was staying with her parents in Columbus while Clarence was in Vietnam, local arts patron Fran Luckoff introduced Aminah to Columbus woodcarver, 73 year-old Elijah Pierce, at the International Art Festival
exhibition that was held at the YWCA. Three years later, Ursel White Lewis, who actively encouraged Aminah and other young African-American artists, writers, dancers, and musicians in the Mt. Vernon Avenue community to develop their talents, brought Aminah to Pierce’s barbershop and formally introduced her to the folk artist. Pierce earned a living as a barber but also used the barbershop as a studio where he carved and a gallery where he displayed his wood sculptures and reliefs. The meeting between Pierce and Aminah marked the beginning of a meaningful relationship they shared for the next 13 years, until Pierce’s death in 1984. In addition to the hours Aminah spent at the barbershop sketching while Pierce barbered and carved, the two lived in the same neighborhood, and they often took long walks together. Her relationship with Pierce strengthened Aminah’s belief in the ongoing presence of ancestral spirits and in her own responsibility as an artist to honor the past and connect it to the present. Pierce, who had proclaimed himself to be anointed and a healer, told Aminah that she too had these gifts (Austin, 2002). He spoke to Aminah about the world of spirits and the interconnectedness of the living and the dead. The guidance that he offered Aminah was rooted in African cosmology. It strengthened her belief in the spirit world and in the need to transcend struggle and turmoil in order to find healing and spirituality. Aminah recalled:

I would sketch and he would talk because he knew I had a troubled heart…drawing was the only thing that brought solace to my life, and so our relationship blossomed…. I knew his heart and spirit…the goodness of his life and his spirit and his heart—it was like threads of a blanket to everything around him, and that included myself. So I was touched very deeply by his life and his wisdom, and those things he gave to me …” (A. Robinson, personal communication, September 1, 2001).

Through the guidance and mentorship of both her father and Pierce, Aminah came to believe that her art was a manifestation of the spiritual gifts God had given her and that
her preordained purpose in life was to adhere to a rigorous work schedule with as few worldly distractions as possible. Aminah was comforted by this deeply religious man who understood the uncertainties she was facing over the breakup of her marriage and the prospect of raising her son as a single parent.

The next few years were difficult ones for Aminah. During her marriage, she had traveled extensively with Clarence and had been on her own a great deal of the time. As a result, living with her parents seemed even more oppressive than it had before she was married. With the hope of quickly finding a job, she moved with Sydney to an apartment within blocks of her parent’s house. After an exhaustive search for work failed, she was forced to apply for welfare despite her parents’ strong disapproval of doing so. In an autobiographical drawing, *The Line: Buckeye Federal Bank, Mt. Vernon Avenue*, 1971, (see Figure 12) she captured her personal anguish of being a single mother on welfare by depicting the endless line of predominantly female African Americans waiting to cash their welfare checks. In a similar drawing of the same period, she compares the welfare system to slavery by depicting the crowded conditions of the waiting room in the welfare office. In the drawing she titled *Relics of Slavery (Study # 1), One Day in the Welfare Sittin’ Room*, the figures’ bent postures and vacant eyes capture the hopelessness of their situations. *The Line*, the first work of art Aminah sold was purchased by Columbus arts patron Fran Luckoff (F. Luckoff, personal communication, July 23, 2007).

In 1974, after she accepted a job with the Columbus Recreation and Parks Department, Aminah left welfare behind and moved into the house in which she has remained ever since. When her young son noticed that they had no furniture, Aminah said she would make them a chair. *Gift of Love* (see Figure 13) is a throne-like chair she
made from wood and leather scraps and the gnarled root of a tree. She has attached dozens of hogmawg figures including her father, mother, Elijah Pierce, the elders, and the children. The leather functions in practical terms as a seat and its carving of a man, woman, and child is the central theme of the work— the importance of family around which everything else revolves. The figures that populate the arms and back of the chair are made of hogmawg, human hair clippings, clothespins, sticks, fabric and other found objects. In addition, some of the materials are spiritually and historically significant. For example, the Georgia clay Aminah uses symbolizes the experiences of her ancestors and those of many African Americans who were enslaved on the Sea Islands off the coast of South Carolina and Georgia prior to and during the Civil War. The hair clippings are form Elijah Pierce’s barbershop and symbolize the spiritual nature of their relationship. When she returned from Africa, she added the image of the Oba, the king of Lagos, Nigeria, whom she had met. As Aminah added to this chair, it became bigger than her front door. Years later in order to include it in the exhibition at the Columbus Museum of Art, friends of Aminah raised the money to hire a contractor to enlarge the doorway so the chair could be moved to the museum. The same day the new oversize door was installed, Aminah began carving both sides of it. She then painted it in bright, jewel-like colors and the door became another mark that sets both the inside and outside of her house apart from all other houses.

Aminah considered the job she accepted as an art instructor with the Recreation Department a blessing. But the work was demanding and the pay barely adequate. In 1981 she was hospitalized with a back injury related to work, but when she was unable to claim job disability benefits she was forced to apply for welfare again. After she returned
to work, the Welfare Department said she had been overpaid due to a miscalculation, and she struggled to pay back every cent by sending the department ten dollars each month for the next ten years.

**Spirituals, Safe Places, and the Strength of Women**

In her depictions of the Middle Passage, slavery, and the northern migration during the Civil War period, Aminah examines the effects of these historical events on African-Americans, particularly women. Her narrative paintings, sculptures, and drawings emphasize the courageous roles played by women as they attempted to survive the horrid, inhumane conditions of the Middle Passage and slavery, and the dignity with which they struggled to keep their families together when they fled the South. Her work also personifies her identification with these women and her own struggles as a young, single parent.

Although Aminah was raised as a Catholic, the black spirituals that filled the Baptist churches and the gospel music that was broadcast over the radio every Sunday could be heard throughout Poindexter and held great meaning for her. When she was a young girl she often attended Sunday school at Union Grove Baptist Church with her friends because Saint Cyprian’s, the Robinsons’ church near Poindexter, had no Sunday school. In 1946, when their mother was recovering from tuberculosis, Aminah and her sisters lived with their aunt and uncle on Seventeenth Street and attended Sunday school at the Second Baptist Church, directly across the street. Aminah understood that the words and music of the spirituals were powerful because they had grown out of slavery and had passed to succeeding generations, in most cases by strong and determined women. For Aminah, the spirituals came to symbolize the strength of these women who
struggled to keep the family together despite the nightmare of slavery. They also represent women who endeavor to keep their families together today and to impart values, beliefs, and traditions to the next generation. Later when Aminah experienced the difficulties of a failed marriage and of being a single mother on welfare, these songs became even more meaningful to her. In the 1969 edition of *The African Background Outlined* by Carter G. Woodson that she loaned to me, Aminah underlined the following sentence in the section entitled “The Negro in Art,” “The Negro spirituals, however, developed out of the sufferings of African souls…. Among people passing through an ordeal art develops” (1969, p. 452).

This idea that great art and music can result from suffering and loss is a recurring theme in Aminah’s writings and conversations. She often speaks about the necessity of transcending the pain she has experienced in her life through the creative process. To some extent, she considers her own work, like the spirituals, the result of suffering and also a means of transcending suffering. In writing about black women artists, Michelle Cliff (2001) uses spirituals as examples of creativity, beauty, and strength that were the result of the hardship, danger, and tragedy of slavery. “The struggle against adversity,” she concludes, “can be won in a beautiful way” (p. 611). Aminah’s devotion to her art is her answer to racism and to her own personal struggles and losses. Her personification of spirituals as women in drawings and paintings (see Figure 7), and her use of music boxes that play spirituals in her mixed-media works acknowledge the power of this musical form as a symbol of the strength of black women. *The Teachings* (Robinson, 1992) is a book Aminah wrote and illustrated, in which the powerful hands and expressive faces of women each represent a different spiritual. In *My Lord, What a Morning* (see Figure 9),
she assembled a “music box” by combining a set of ten antique wooden organ pipes with the workings of music boxes that play the spiritual *My Lord, What a Morning*. The pipes are painted to represent women and crowned with found pieces of old decorative iron fencing:

I have always done spirituals throughout my life. They are all women because we’re the ones who pass it on. During slavery, women were the ones who kept things together. They were strong women like my mother. We don’t have that kind of woman now—that kind of strength. We didn’t go through those kinds of things the slaves went through. They built the bridges so we didn’t have to go through those kinds of struggles (Columbus Museum of Art, 2002, p. 71).

The women in the spirituals are part of a long line of strong African Americans that begins with those who survived the Middle Passage and slavery and extends to those who live in the present.

In all of these examples and thousands of others Aminah has painted, sculpted, drawn, and sewn, she expresses her belief in the transformative nature of life—that is, the capacity of people and of African-American women in particular to survive and even flourish despite the tragedies, losses, and struggles that life presents. P.H. Collins (2000) describes this deep reservoir that nourishes the creativity of women like Aminah:

Black women intellectuals have long explored this private, hidden space of Black women’s consciousness, the “inside” ideas that allow black women to cope with and, in many cases, transcend the confines of intersecting oppressions of race, class, gender, and sexuality….The voices of these African-American women are not those of victims but of survivors. Their ideas and actions suggest that not only does a self-defined, group-derived Black women’s standpoint exist, but that its presence has been essential to U.S. Black women’s survival (p. 98).

Aminah’s art became a world of her own creation, what Collins describes as a safe space where the artist can freely define herself and resist “objectification as the Other” (p. 101).
While Collins’s idea of a safe place is one that is inhabited by a black woman’s circle of living friends and relatives, Aminah’s safe place is populated by departed ancestors and famous literary figures she has met only in books. In the series of paintings about black women entitled *A Clutch of Blossoms*, the artist’s deceased mother and grandmother and all their friends are very much alive and are joined by Aminah’s arts and literary heroes: Selma Burke, Zora Neal Thurston, Maya Angelou, and Gwendolyn Brooks. This safe place provides personal comfort for Aminah and also serves as a vehicle to present viewers with a more inclusive and just account of history. “We are a people,” writes Alice Walker (1983) in *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens*, “A people do not throw their geniuses away. And if they are thrown away, it is our duty as artists and as witnesses for the future to collect them again for the sake of our children, and, if necessary, bone by bone” (p. 92).

Aminah also confronts places from the past that are not safe. In RagGonNons such as *Dad’s Journey* (see Figures 5 and 6) and sculptures such as *The Ark*, she depicts the horror of those who took their own lives and those of their children during the Atlantic crossing of the Middle Passage. In these works, Aminah emphasizes the story of those who did not take their own lives but who had the strength and courage to survive the horrors and become the ancestors of all those who followed. By depicting these transformative events, Aminah attempts to transcend the horrific events that she considers part of her own experience. For her, the transformative power of art is twofold. On a personal level, the act of making art is a means of coping with her own losses and struggles. At the same time, her goal is to transform others by educating and empowering them through the stories her work reveals.
Africa

After returning from Puerto Rico, Aminah re-established her friendship with photographer and artist Kojo Kamau, who had been a classmate both in elementary school and at East High School. In 1978, Kamau and his wife, Dr. Mary Ann Williams, an associate professor in Black Studies at The Ohio State University, helped raise funds for what was to become a pivotal experience for Aminah. For six weeks, she participated in a study trip to Africa, organized by a Cleveland-based group, the American Forum for Study. Aminah was the only visual artist in the group of twenty-nine citizens from a variety of fields, including education, medicine, social work, and business. The trip inspired a body of work consisting of more than three thousand pieces that Aminah called *Afrikan Pilgrimage, the Extended Family.* Many of the works are on homemade paper she had prepared before she left Columbus. Throughout the trip, which included stops in Senegal, Ethiopia, Kenya, Nigeria, and Egypt, Aminah marveled at the connections she found between her own family and communal life in Columbus and the people she met and the communities she visited in Africa. On the trip, Aminah visited Goree Island off the coast of Dakar, Senegal, where thousands of Africans were held before being forced into ships that took them as slaves to the Americas. Aminah explained to me as we looked at her drawing of this scene:

This is the ‘door of no return.’ Once you go through that door, there is no return. The slaves were kept in these little slave houses. It was very heart wrenching to feel and to hear and to see that. Once you have experienced it, you’ll never forget it. It’s always there (A. Robinson, personal communication, August 30, 2001).

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I remember coming home from this particular interview exhausted and deeply moved by Aminah’s drawing of Goree Island (see Figure 2) and her description of being there. Then and whenever I encounter that particular drawing, I am especially moved. It brings to mind the hauntingly silent photographs of empty concentration camps after WWII in which my ancestors perished as innocent victims.

In Egypt a holy man gave Robinson the name “Aminah,” the feminine form of the Arabic word “amin,” which means faithful, trustworthy. She did not think much of it until she returned to Columbus and told her father about the incident. She was amazed to learn that the name “Aminah” was traditionally used in the Robinson family and was the middle name of three family members: her father’s mother, an aunt, and a cousin. In 1980, she legally added “Aminah” to her given names and became Aminah Brenda Lynn Robinson. Aminah believes that coincidences, such as this one concerning her African name, are not coincidences at all but carefully orchestrated outcomes arranged by spiritual forces in the world.

For Aminah, the trip to Africa confirmed her understanding of the spirit world, the interconnectedness of the ancestors, the Middle Passage and slavery, and the strong links between Africans and African Americans. Myers (1996) in her doctoral dissertation on the artist, points out that African resonances lived in Aminah’s work even before she realized they were African. Many of the stories and practices that were prevalent in the African-American community when Aminah was growing up were considered a routine part of life but were not particularly attributed to their African sources. In fact, many African Americans preferred not to acknowledge African connections that might be considered “primitive” (P.H. Collins, 2000) and this reluctance probably accounts for
Aminah’s mother trying to discourage her daughter from having long conversations with Uncle Alvin and Aunt Cornelia. However, Aminah was a keen observer of what went on around her. Through the conversations with her elders and an extensive amount of reading, she understood and was proud of the fact that she was rooted in African cultural traditions. One of these African resonances was commonly seen in Poindexter Village. Aminah’s parents and other parents in the neighborhood made their children wear red flannel bags filled with asafetida\(^6\) around their necks to protect them from harm and disease. These children were probably not aware that these pouches were directly related to *minkisi*, West African spirit pouches. In 1970, Aminah visited Haiti while she was living in Puerto Rico and one of the first things she noticed was the red pouches that many people wore around their necks and their similarity to those she wore as a child. By this time, the spiritual nature of the pouches and their connection to African *minkisi* were clear to her. When she arrived in Africa ten years later, Aminah was well aware of the connections between her own family’s spiritual customs and beliefs, the vodun\(^7\) charms she had seen in Haiti, and the religious practices she observed in Africa. “What I found in Africa,” Aminah has said about her trip, “was Poindexter Village” (A. Robinson, personal communication, October 30, 2001). For a long time, I thought she was referring to the similarities she observed in family relationships and the business that was being conducted in the markets. But in a recent conversation (A. Robinson, personal communication, July 11, 2007), she indicated that she was referring to beliefs about spirits and the activities of healers and shamans that were practiced by both Africans and

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\(^6\) Asafetida is a bitter, foul-smelling resinous material obtained from the roots of a plant and useful in treating colic and respiratory illnesses (Grieve, M).

\(^7\) Vodun or voodoo is practiced by people of African descent in the Western hemisphere and is a synthesis of African religions and Roman Catholicism (Thompson, 1984).
African Americans. Years before her trip to Africa, Aminah attached *minkisi* in the form of button-eyed pouches to her RagGonNons and rag paintings. These cloth pouches that contain medicines such as asafetida, special objects, and prayers are a direct link to her African past and her belief that the spirits these pouches embody will always inhabit the earth.

Sapelo Island, Georgia

Through many conversations she had had as a child and teenager with her Aunt Cornelia Johnson, Aminah became fascinated with her father’s family history and her ancestors’ forced journey from Angola to slavery in Sapelo Island, Georgia. In the 1980s, the Georgia Department of Natural Resources hired a genealogist who recorded in great detail, information about the slaves who had been brought to Sapelo in the 18th and 19th centuries and whose descendents continue to live on the island in the community of Hog Hammock. Because Aunt Cornelia left the island with her family just after the Civil War, when she was six or seven years old, there were no family’s records. In 1983, friends in Columbus helped Aminah work with the office of Governor Frank Harris of Georgia to arrange the first of several trips she would make to Sapelo. In Hog Hammock, the only remaining community on the island, almost all of the seventy or so residents are descendants of slaves. Almost all of the people who remain are elderly. Younger people have moved to the mainland to pursue educations and livelihoods. In addition to the drawings and paintings (see Figure 14) that Aminah created during and after her trips to the island, she constructed a number of three-dimensional “Sapelo walkers” that represent the inhabitants of Hog Hammock, including a basket maker, women grinding rice, and a net maker.
Today, most of Sapelo is owned by the state of Georgia and is a protected sea island ecological area. For years, developers have been interested in purchasing the Hog Hammock area on the south side of the island and turning it into a vacation destination. In addition to Aminah’s personal interest in learning more about her Sapelo ancestors, her objective has been to document this community before it disappears. In her Sapelo series, Aminah recorded the historic sites and the daily life of the residents as a means of documenting their claims to the land. A number of other African-American artists and photographers including Beverly Buchanan and Carrie May Weems have visited the Sea Islands and created art in a show of support for the islanders as they struggle to hold on to their land (Collins, L. G., 2002).

In 1936, as part of the Work Project Administration, writers were sent to Sapelo to interview ex-slaves and their descendents and specifically to research their cultural connections to Africa. In 1940, these accounts were published in a book entitled *Drums and Shadows: Survival Studies Among the Georgia Coastal Negroes*. In a 1986 edition of the book, Aminah underlined several passages in red ink. One was an introductory note by the director of the Georgia Writers Project written in 1940 concerning the importance of recording this information “while this generation lives or they will lose much of their accuracy and value” (p. xiii). Another part of this book that Aminah noted had to do with the African customs and beliefs maintained by the slaves on Sapelo and how the descendents of these slaves continue these traditions:

With the continued arrival of Africans to these isolated plantation communities, native ceremonies and customs were renewed or exchanged. This continuous renewal and exchange of folk customs intensified the folk urge fostered by isolation. This naturally delayed the intrusion of white culture and the Negro kept intact much of his racial heritage. For these
reasons the student of Negro folklore turns to coastal Georgia for source material. Here he may find living Negroes who remember parents or grandparents born in Africa (Joyner, 1986, pp. xlii-xliii).

Each of the three times Aminah visited Sapelo, she was aware of local traditions that had originated in Africa and that, in some cases, were still evident. The Gullah people, who live on the coast and Sea Islands of South Carolina and Georgia, are descendants of West African slaves who were brought to the area in the 18\textsuperscript{th} and 19\textsuperscript{th} centuries because of their knowledge of growing rice. Southern plantation owners were interested in developing rice as a cash crop since the climate of the Sea Islands was suitable for growing the grain. The slaves, who came from what was known as the Rice Coast of West Africa, spoke Gullah, a form of the creole language spoken in British colonies in West Africa. Remnants of the language and of West African cultural practices having to do with burial, witchcraft, basket making, telling of folktales, and a diet rich in rice are still practiced by the Gullah people (Opala, 2007).

I had never heard of Sapelo Island until I saw Aminah’s work and began asking her questions about it. Her descriptions of its beauty and of the small community of descendants from the 19\textsuperscript{th} century slave community were intriguing. In the summer of 2002, during a family trip to the area, I made arrangements to visit Sapelo with two of my sisters-in-law. Well in advance of the trip, we booked tickets on the Sapelo Queen, a ferry which makes one trip to the island in the morning and one trip back in the late afternoon. Seeing the island through Aminah’s paintings, sculptures, and quilts was a wonderful preparation for the trip. We knew to look for the places Aminah had depicted in her work: Behavior Cemetery, buildings made from tabby\textsuperscript{8}, the Country Store, and the

\textsuperscript{8} Tabby is a building material made from oyster shells, sand, and lime (McFeely, 1994).
First African Baptist Church. Because of its geographic isolation, its continuous
inhabitance by descendents of the slave community, and its rich marine life, Sapelo has
become a “specimen” caught in a time warp that has attracted research by many
historians, anthropologists, and marine biologists. Aging residents are desperately trying
to preserve a way of life that cannot be sustained. When Aminah first visited Sapelo in
1983, she stayed with Mattie Carter, one of the revered island storytellers who has since
passed away. Aminah also met Cornelia Bailey who has become the most prominent
spokesperson for the island and who has worked to preserve the West African heritage of
the island. Clearly, the future of this small island community of Hog Hammock is at risk
and the few remaining residents struggle to maintain a balance of preserving its heritage
through making its story known and appreciated and, at the same time, preventing it from
becoming a commercialized tourist attraction. As a result, residents seem to be weary of
visitors. Aminah commented that during her visits, she felt like an outsider and the people
“did not do too much talking” (A. Robinson, personal communication, September 1,
2001). However in 2001, Aminah was pleased to be considered a “descendant” and
invited to a celebration limited to those individuals who could trace their ancestors to
Sapelo.

New York and the Library Commission

In 1989, Aminah was the recipient of a fellowship from the Institute for
Contemporary Art in New York. For seven months she and Boo Boo, her chihuahua,
spent seven months at P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center in Long Island City, Queens.
P.S. 1 is an old, red-brick school that has been converted into one of the country’s largest
art centers. Now affiliated with the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the center
provides studio space for emerging artists and living arrangements in nearby apartments. Each day from 8 a. m. to 5 p. m. Aminah worked in the studio at P.S. 1 and then in the evening at the Printmaking Workshop on Seventeenth Street in Chelsea. The highly regarded Printmaking Workshop, a nonprofit organization founded by master printmaker Robert Blackburn in 1948, was a mecca for both those who wanted to learn printmaking techniques and those who needed a well-equipped facility to produce their prints. At the Workshop, Aminah learned printing and bookmaking techniques and developed a relationship with Kelly Driscoll, who, in the years that followed, would print Aminah’s limited-edition books. On Saturdays and Sundays, Aminah took long walks on 125th Street in Harlem, where she often ended up at the Studio Museum, or she rode the subways sketching and using her skills of penetration to study the faces of people on the train. By the late 1980s the number of homeless people had escalated, and they became the subject of many of Aminah’s New York Stories series, including a limited-edition book, Homelessness in Amerika. In discussing this series, Aminah observed her inability to understand why the richest country in the world has so many homeless people and she also revealed that when she was younger, she was very close to being homeless herself (A. Robinson, personal communication, July 26, 2007). During one of Aminah’s many random subway excursions, she witnessed the birth of a baby on the floor of the train, an event she chronicled in drawings, cloth paintings, and mixed-media sculptures.

When the Columbus Metropolitan Library awarded Aminah a major commission for the atrium staircase in their newly renovated main building in 1990, she used the proceeds to pay off her welfare debt and the loan on her house. She was able to leave the job she had held at Columbus Recreation and Parks for 19 years to pursue art on a full-
time basis. In addition to her many ongoing projects, she wrote and illustrated two commercially published picture books and illustrated five others during the 1990s. The first of these was in 1991, when writer Michael J. Rosen, then the artistic director of the Thurber House in Columbus, asked Aminah to illustrate his story *Elijah’s Angel* (Rosen, 1992). The book, a warm-hearted Christmas/Hanukkah story about Rosen’s childhood encounter with Elijah Pierce, initiated Aminah’s relationship with Harcourt, Brace, & Company. Subsequently, Harcourt published *The Teachings* (Robinson, 1992) and *A Street Called Home* (Robinson, 1997), both written and illustrated by Aminah. In *The Teachings*, Aminah lovingly illustrates in pen and ink the traditional African-American spirituals that have always meant so much to her, and in *A Street Called Home* she captured in words and colorful neon acrylics the busy street life of Mt. Vernon Avenue before urban renewal in the 1960s. She also illustrated *Sophie* (Fox, 1994), a story by Mem Fox about the cycle of life; and *The School of Pompey Walker* (Rosen, 1995), by Michael Rosen, a true story that Aminah had brought to his attention about a black man and a white man who raised money to build a school for African-American children in a small Ohio town before the Civil War. Other collaborations include Aminah’s rag paintings for *To Be A Drum* (Coleman, 1998), an overview of African-American history by Evelyn Coleman; and *The Shaking Bag* (Battle-Lavert, 2000), a children’s story about generosity by Gwendolyn Battle-Lavert.

**Sydney**

In 1994, Aminah received the devastating news that her son Sydney, who was twenty-seven years old, took his own life in Chicago, after struggling with depression for several years. He had gone to Chicago to live with his father and was only a few weeks
away from graduating with a degree that would have enabled him to teach children with disabilities. A few years before, he had earned a degree from Ohio State in ceramic engineering, but he was not satisfied with the job he found in this field which left him stressed and unfulfilled. Sydney was a gifted writer and talented artist who created dozens of journals filled with daily entries and hundreds of drawings and paintings. He had a special rapport with his mother and understood and appreciated her devotion to her work, her respect of traditional craft techniques that had been handed down from her parents, and her unrelenting commitment to preserving important stories and passing them on to the next generation. Aminah created dozens of books and drawings for Sydney as he was growing up. After his death, she memorialized him in a 50-foot-long RagGonNon that celebrates his life by focusing on things that brought him delight as a child, such as his dog Timmy and the “Dandelion Song,” his favorite Crowman tale about growing and learning. The RagGonNon, *Sydney’s Memorial*, includes an accordion book about the ancestors. Like them, Sydney is always present and is “looking forward and backward and still gathering knowledge even though he’s gone” (A. Robinson, personal communication, March 1, 2002).

Israel and the Doll House

During the summer of 1998, Aminah spent a month in Herzliya, Israel, a Mediterranean city close to Tel Aviv. As the recipient of an Ohio Arts Council Visual Arts Travel Fellowship, she was given an apartment and studio at the artist’s residence owned by the municipality of Herzliya. As she had done in preparation for her trip to Africa, she kept her personal items to a minimum and filled her suitcases with art materials, including paper, bolts of cloth, and specially prepared transparent sheets of
deerskin. For part of the trip Aminah was joined by her friend, Columbus art consultant Susan Saxbe, and two other visiting artists from Ohio, Michael Rosen and Walter Zurko. Together with their hosts, they toured Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, the artists’ enclave at Ein Hod, and the Judean desert and hills outside the cities. On her own in Jerusalem, Aminah was especially drawn to the crowded markets of the Old City and the constant flow of Hasidic Jews, Eastern and Greek Orthodox clerics, Arab vendors, and Ethiopians (see Figure 15). In *Sacred Pages: The People of the Book*, the body of work that emerged from the trip, her drawings on deerskin, cloth paintings, rag paintings, limited-edition books, and a spectacular 50 feet long RagGonNon capture the diversity of this complex land.

As is her custom, Aminah worked on two bodies of work while in Israel. In addition to the work about the people and places of Israel, she also turned her attention to the *Doll House*, a project she had been contemplating for some time about Columbus and the larger African-American community. In drawings on paper and parchment executed in Israel, she developed her vision for this installation. When she returned home, she had a small workshop (see Figure 3) built in her backyard. She called it the “Doll House” and gradually began filling it with mixed-media vignettes and dollhouses carved from yard sale furniture. Painted and carved leather bags hang from the ceiling, and on a windowsill are delicate leaves that Aminah has treated to make entirely transparent and then painted and beaded. One-of-a-kind books and large, three-dimensional, puppet-like figures bring to life the characters from the Blackberry Patch, Poindexter Village, and Mt. Vernon
Avenue, as well as figures and events from African-American history. Like a child’s
dollhouse, Aminah’s dollhouse is a microcosm of society’s essential elements--family
and community.

Rejection and Acceptance

In writing about the lack of attention paid to black visual art and artists in much of
the 20th century, L.G. Collins (2002) notes that early in the century, W.E.B. Du Bois in
The Souls of Black Folk, set the tone for ignoring the visual arts by extolling the virtues
of black music and decrying the state of black visual arts. The Harlem Renaissance or
The New Negro Movement of the 1920s and The Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and
1970s were two major movements aimed at affecting social change by means of black
cultural production. Social critics and activists attempted to develop a black aesthetic that
would empower African Americans. They praised black achievements in music and
literature and, like Du Bois, generally ignored or devalued visual art that was not
politically driven (L.G. Collins, 2002; hooks, 1995). The third wave of a black cultural
arts movement came in the 1980s and heralded the importance of the visual arts for black
creativity. By this time, African Americans had more access to art schools and art
markets and postmodernist and multicultural theories shattered traditional notions that
had narrowly defined art. African-American artists and particularly African-American
women artists began reflecting a widespread interest in Africa and African-American
history in their work.

Aminah and the work she was creating as early as the 1960s anticipated this later
blossoming of black art. When she attended art school in the late 1950s, Aminah was one
of only four black students. Although all four of the students received scholarships that
enabled them to study for two or three years, the scholarships were withdrawn before any of them could graduate. This limited access was better than no access at all and provided Aminah with the academic art training she craved. Her relationship with her parents and family elders and her careful reading of black thinkers like Du Bois and Woodson instilled in her a deep sense of self, a firm grounding in African and African-American history, and a missionary zeal to create art that reflected herself and her community.

Long before multiculturalism and postmodernism created the right conditions for the successful emergence of black artists in the 1980s, Aminah had found her voice and was expressing herself in an aesthetic steeped in African and African-American art-making traditions and subject matter.

By the 1980s with the third wave of the black cultural arts movements, the conditions for exhibiting and selling work by African Americans had much improved. Aminah’s work was gaining attention both inside and outside Columbus. In 1983 Cincinnati gallery owner Carl Solway saw Aminah’s work in a group exhibition at the Contemporary Arts Center in Cincinnati. Impressed, he initiated a relationship that accelerated Aminah’s career by showing her work in his gallery; by bringing her to the attention of galleries and museums in Chicago, New York, and St. Louis; and by putting her in touch with interested collectors throughout the country. The work that was sold through these connections enabled Aminah to send Sydney to a private high school and pay for his college education at Ohio State. Aminah’s career received an additional boost when she received what would be the first of four Ohio Arts Council individual artist grants in 1979, followed by those awarded in 1987, 1989, and 1991. In 1984 she received the state of Ohio Governor’s Award for the Visual Arts for an individual artist.
Although the wider arts community was becoming more interested in Aminah’s work during the 1980s, the black community was ambivalent. Aminah’s close friends who had supported and encouraged her in high school and art school continued to do so. However, members of the black community did not purchase her work nor was it widely exhibited in the community. She had researched local, family-own black businesses and created work about them. When she offered the work to the presidents of these companies, they politely refused to take it. Aminah believes they were ashamed of the work because it was so different from traditional art (A. Robinson, personal communication, June 14, 2007). Similarly, reaction to Aminah’s Sapelo work from island residents was not universally positive. In interviews conducted with residents, Myers (1996) was surprised to learn that some of them took offense at Aminah’s Sapelo Walker sculptures and cloth paintings and drawings of life on the island. One of the islanders told Myers that some of the people thought Aminah was mocking them by depicting the island people with sticks and mud. Aminah herself was not surprised by this response and commented that she was aware that her own family and community in Columbus did not understand and appreciate her work. When I read hooks’s analysis of art by black women at the end of the 20th century, I am sure she had artists like Aminah in mind. She observed, “There can never be one critical paradigm for the evaluation of artistic work. Narrow limiting aesthetics within black communities tend to place innovative black artistry on the margins” (hooks, 1995, p. 83). Clearly Aminah falls into the category of innovative artists who have faced rejection from those closest to her.

I, too, was caught off guard when I read an editorial in The Post, the Ohio University student newspaper concerning Aminah’s 2007 commission for the university’s
student center. Aminah’s depictions of the characters of Mt. Vernon Avenue were rendered in mosaics in the floor of the main lobby of the new building. When I accompanied Aminah to the dedication of the building, I learned that the editorial board of the student newspaper had published an editorial in which they condemned the figures as being “demeaning” and “offensive” (Editorial, 2007). I responded to the article with my own letter to the editor in which I defended the students’ right to dislike the piece on aesthetic grounds but I suggested that they should have made an effort to “do their homework” by contacting Aminah and researching her work. Had they done so, they would have understood that Aminah depicted the Chickenfoot Lady, the Crowman, and the other inhabitants of Poindexter Village with the utmost respect and admiration.

In recent years, Aminah has demonstrated some ambivalence about selling her work. When Sydney was alive, money to support him and insure his college education was a priority and she sold whatever she could. In his introduction to Zora Neal Hurston’s *Mules and Men*, Robert Hemenway (1978) commented that at one point in her career, Hurston received recognition but very little money. On this page in her copy of the book, Aminah wrote, “Who in the hell wants recognition without money! I have a son to put through college.” Since Sydney’s death, Aminah has indicated that some of her work such as the RagGonNons and the original art for published books is not for sale but rather is “for the future” and should only be sold or given to public institutions, where many people will be able to see them. Commissions have been a mixed blessing for Aminah. While the library commission allowed her the opportunity to leave her job at the recreation centers, she disliked having to create art that required specific dimensions and materials. She had a similar experience with a commission for the Baker Center at Ohio
University in Athens. As a consequence, she has decided to refuse commissions because she believes they would require her to compromise her aesthetic concerns and creative process to fulfill the patron’s criteria for subject matter or the physical dimensions of a particular building. In addition, she has a sincere fear of the legal documents and the process of signing contracts which usually accompanies these large projects.

In 2003 when it opened, the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center in Cincinnati selected a major RagGonNon by Aminah for permanent display in their five-story entrance hall. Entitled Journeys, the huge 22 feet by 15 feet cloth painting is a tapestry composed of many smaller cloth paintings that span the artist’s career. Aminah completed a companion piece for the Freedom Center that is approximately the same size. These massive hangings depict events from African-American history, Columbus neighborhoods, and Aminah’s travels. In 2004, Aminah was the recipient of a prestigious MacArthur fellowship. Given to “talented individuals who have shown extraordinary originality and dedication in their creative pursuits and a marked capacity for self-direction” (MacArthur, 2005), the $500,000, unrestricted award is distributed over a five-year period. In addition to providing financial security, the award bestows on recipients widespread public recognition and commendation. Since the award, Aminah has not changed her life style. She remains in the same house but has recently added a studio she designed herself. She has also been able to travel to Italy and to Peru. Her work is available for purchase in two galleries, one in Columbus and the other in Chelsea in New York City. When the galleries sell a piece, Aminah is delighted to receive the money and
also to know that her work is appreciated by individuals or institutions that collect art. The MacArthur award is a safety net that has allowed her to concentrate on her work and let the galleries take care of selling it.

The same year she received the MacArthur award, Aminah was the first contemporary American artist to have a solo exhibition in the National Fine Arts Museum in Santiago, Chile. In 2006 and 2007, *Symphonic Poem*, Aminah’s retrospective exhibition traveled to Brooklyn Art Museum, Tacoma Art Museum, and the Toledo Museum of Art. The reviews of her work in each of these venues were glowing. *New York Times* critic Grace Glueck (2006) pointed out that Aminah’s art might look like folk or outsider art but it is much more sophisticated and complex. A reviewer in Tacoma wrote, “*Symphonic Poem: Aminah Brenda Lynn Robinson* has just swept into the Tacoma Art Museum with the detail and grandeur of its musical namesake” (Ponnekanti, 2006). Another reviewer noted that Aminah “achieves success without abandoning personal truth” (R. Rice, 2006, p. 44). In a feature article in the *Cleveland Plain Dealer Sunday Magazine*, Brian Albrecht (2004) describes Aminah as a “keeper of cultural and community tradition” and her use of diverse materials and techniques a “stylistic stew of inspiration” (p. 10).

Form and Idea

In Aminah’s work, the men’s ties and colorful buttons are important because they represent the human beings who wore them. In some cases anonymous donors leave bags of buttons, beads, and fabrics on her porch and other times close family and friends bring them to her and share the particular stories they represent. Like many other friends of Aminah, I have given her special jars of buttons like those I found in my mother’s house
after she passed away. Aminah sews the buttons on cloth paintings and RagGonNons and, like the spirit pouches, the buttons hold the sparks of all the people who wore the clothes that had these buttons on them. There are often two stories in Aminah’s work—the one she is depicting and the one the materials represent. “It is this synthesis of form and idea, a synthesis covering the vast distance from a lump of inert clay to a moral principle,” observes Nadaner (1984), “that makes art so magical” (p. 21). As viewers learn to “read” Aminah’s works, they begin to anticipate this union of form and content.

Aminah’s media and processes in themselves tell a story about surviving and “making do” as a black, female artist in a largely white, male world. Audre Lorde (1995) reminds us that class and economic differences affect the materials artist’s choose and, in many cases, determine who is and is not an artist. Aminah’s lack of money never stopped her from making art because she “made do” with natural materials, found objects, and paper and cloth scraps. For example, Aminah created another large ongoing body of work using envelopes from letters she received in the mail. After steaming open the envelopes and dying them, she creates *Unwritten Love Letters* (see Figure 16) about important figures including Sojourner Truth, Selma Burke, and Alice Walker and events such as the emancipation and the March on Washington. She embellishes them with beads, buttons, and fabric, and affixes cancelled, commemorative stamps to get them to an ethereal “destination.” *Unwritten Love Letters*, like so much of her work, celebrate the accomplishments of both well-known and obscure African Americans. The viewer is the “recipient” of the letter and receives several layers of information. Aminah’s drawing and words represent a story from the past, the cancelled stamps document historic and contemporary African Americans, and the return address on the envelope provides a
glimpse into the contemporary life of the artist herself by identifying those with whom she corresponds. When Aminah uses old envelopes and canceled stamps and materials like them, she accomplishes more than just “making do,” she is transforming the ordinary into the extraordinary.

Philosopher Michel de Certeau (1998) describes this “making do” as a means of easing the oppression of everyday life. For Aminah, “making do” is making art and making art is a place of solace, protection, and relief. As a child, her “safe place” was the studio she created under her bed. By the time she began art school, she recalls, “I just lived in this world of arts. It was a completely different world that I lived in day in and day out. I just couldn’t get enough of it” (A. Robinson, personal communication, August 30, 2001). Today as a mature artist, Aminah devotes almost all of her waking hours to making art. While she enjoys visiting with friends and fellow artists from time to time, she is most comfortable and content when she is working. On numerous occasions she has told me that when she works, she enters a trancelike realm removed from the reality of time and place.

Even after she was no longer limited financially, Aminah chose to work with hogmawg and found objects because these materials represent a link to her ancestral past and to the ideas she seeks to express in her work. These processes and materials have become her artistic vocabulary and, as a mature artist, she continues to use them. Aminah exemplifies the women that poet, filmmaker, and Women’s Studies professor Trinh T. Minh-Ha (1989) describes, who “despite the threat of rejection, resolutely work toward the unlearning of institutionalized language” (p. 80). In her RagGonNons, handmade books, rag paintings, manuscript pages, Unwritten Love Letters, and three-dimensional
work, Aminah has ignored the “language” of traditional art and has created her own. She makes a point of avoiding words such as “collage” and “assemblage” that are commonly accepted in the art world in favor of “RagGonNon” and “rag painting.” She is proud of using remnants and rags in work such as To Be a Drum and Life Along Water Street (see Figure 10). This artistic vocabulary is complex because it has been nourished by the traditions she learned from her parents, her understanding of African ways of seeing, believing, and doing, and by the wisdom she absorbed from others such as Uncle Alvin, Aunt Cornelia, and Elijah Pierce. At the same time, it is informed by her training in art school and her respect for the drawing skills of Old Masters.

In the wake of multiculturalism, feminism, and postmodern deconstruction of art’s traditional canon, the rest of the world appears to be catching up with Aminah’s work. Since the 1980s, her use of homemade, recycled, and commonly available materials and total immersion in African-American subject matter have gradually found acceptance with museums, commercial galleries, collectors, and the public.

Alternate Histories

In one of the many conversations Aminah and Uncle Alvin had, he mentioned something about unnamed African explorers who had reached the Americas long before Christopher Columbus. Sparked by this information, Aminah began the research that led her to accounts such as those described in Ivan Van Sertima’s They Came Before Columbus (1976). Aminah was fascinated with the story of Abubakari II, the king of Mali, who was reported to have assembled a fleet of vessels and sailed to the Americas nearly two hundred years before Columbus. In 1985 she began a seven-year project to document Abubakari’s story, which resulted in a masterful RagGonNon. One Day in
1307 A.D.: *King Abubakari II*, (see Figure 17) a complex beaded, buttoned, RagGonNon with music boxes, is the story of a courageous explorer, who gave up his throne and crossed the Atlantic with a fleet of two thousand ships. Malian scholars (Diawara, G. as cited in Austin, 2002) believe he reached Brazil nearly 200 years before Columbus landed in the Americas. In addition to revealing the possibility that an African might well have accomplished the feat of reaching the Americas long before a European, this lavish depiction proudly proclaims the power, influence, and wealth of the Mali empire in the 14th century. *One Day in 1307 AD: King Abubakari II* is not only about Abubakari but also depicts the nightmare of the Middle Passage and ultimate freedom represented by Aminah’s son Sydney in Columbus, Ohio, hundreds of years later. This epic piece, like the ancestral figures that flank it, looks both backward and forward. Embedded in the RagGonNon is the African concept of *Sankofa*, the search for wisdom through understanding the past.

Throughout the years, I have had many insightful experiences with Aminah, but one of the most meaningful for me happened when historian Ramona Austin came to Columbus to discuss the Abubakari RagGonNon for her essay in the *Symphonic Poem* catalogue. During Austin’s long conversations with Aminah about the RagGonNon, which was spread on the floor of the museum’s art storage area, I began to realize the depth of meaning in the placement, direction, and color of each of the thousands of stitches, buttons, pouches, and spirit figures that cover the piece. With brilliant design and storied subject matter, Aminah “organizes her narrative in a material architecture built upon Kongo metaphysical notions of cosmos” (Austin, 2002, p. 60). In the same
way that Kongo cosmology links the living and dead, the RagGonNon links ancestral spirits with the present. The piece is infused with applied three-dimensional hinged figures and spirit pouches. Austin (2002) points out:

Such figural pieces are the New World descendents of Kongo nkisi, known in the New World as pointos riscados, pacquet Kongo, and mojos. They are engines of spirit force made active by medicines and the sounds of speech that charge and make myth the fuel in Robinson’s work (p. 55).

Austin helped me see that Aminah had created “a powerful communal document of the memory of the slave trade and a proactive reclamation of historical Africa” (p. 60). In Aminah’s capable hands, Uncle Alvin’s story had become a forceful vehicle for remembering and healing.

Aminah’s work can be viewed as a form of what critical race theorists call “opposition scholarship” (Calmore in Denzin and Lincoln, 2000, p. 265). Critical Race Theory (CRT) holds that racism is so enmeshed in American life that it is considered the norm. The objective of CRT is to insure civil rights and to unmask and expose racism and the white supremacy that has been responsible for subordinating people of color. One strategy to achieve this is the use of storytelling and the sharing of experiences that are the result of being “othered.” In comparison to the white male power structure, Aminah Robinson is liminal—barely perceptible. However, her dedication to creating art that reveals the perspective of her community with all its complex variations affects the ever-widening audience who experience her work. Through careful observation that she calls penetrations, voracious reading and research, and the use of unusual art materials that are linked to her family’s traditions and those of her African and Sea Island ancestors, she creates art that tells simple and complex stories that she hopes will be transformative.
The importance of the storyteller and the telling of the same story from multiple perspectives are essential aspects of both feminism and CRT (Williams as cited in Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). The responsibility of the storyteller is extraordinary because he or she assumes the burden of remembering for the entire community. In telling and retelling stories, the storyteller or griot gives of him or herself emotionally and, to a degree, becomes the property of the community (Williams in Denzin & Lincoln). Aminah often describes herself as the vessel through which God is sending these stories to all those who will look and listen. She often tells me that her work, especially the RagGonNons, journals, and manuscript pages, belong to the community. Since she was a young child, Aminah has served as her community’s griot by collecting the stories and creating art that tells the precious, almost forgotten tales of her community that began in Africa centuries ago and continue today in Columbus, Ohio. Some of these paintings and sculptures such as Abubakari are counter-narratives in which Aminah seeks to question a dominant story by depicting an alternate possibility. In addition to revealing the possibility that an African might well have accomplished the feat of reaching the Americas long before a European, this lavish depiction proudly proclaims the power, influence, and wealth of the Mali empire in the fourteenth century. In the RagGonNon, Aminah connects the past, present, and future by including references to Abubakari’s voyage, the Middle Passage, her community in Columbus, and to her young son Sydney. In Along Water Street, a series from 2007, Aminah has expressed in visual terms another alternative narrative her uncle told her time and time again about Africans who had migrated to the Ohio valley as early as the 1200s. While these stories have yet to be confirmed, they are a metaphor for the constant flow of people in and out of the land that
is today the city of Columbus and of their ancestral connections to those who now live in the area. Aminah’s Abubakari and the Water Street series are powerful testimonies to Aminah’s effectiveness as a storyteller, but they are also a strong critical attack on the legitimacy of the grand narrative of history as we have come know it.

Safe Places

Aminah’s goal is to create a “safe place” for others through her work. She is especially interested in reaching children who have not had the benefit of strong family and community ties and who therefore lack a sense of self. These children cannot be proud of their African and African-American past if they are not aware of it. In writing about anti-oppressive education as a means to fight racism, sexism, classism, and heterosexism, and other forms of oppression, education scholar Kevin Kumahsiro (2002) suggests a four-pronged attack that includes creating a safe place for those who are oppressed, educating others about oppression, critically examining privilege and “othering,” and working to change the oppressive nature of society. Aminah’s work embraces many of these characteristics by creating a “safe place” to be African American and by exposing forms of oppression to those who are unaware. hooks (1995) points out the legitimacy of “oppositional views” that come from different places and the fact that work that comes out of poverty is not necessarily lacking as a result. She reminds us that each of us has different memories of the same events, people, and places depending on our grounding. Aminah is able to see blackness differently and to talk about it in an innovative, different way. Through her work, she remembers, resists, pushes, and protests in an effort to encourage awareness, pride, and change.
Aminah’s striking physical appearance, unconventional living and working routine, and distinctive artistic vocabulary have set her apart from others. She often speaks of having a “different walk” from people around her. Since she was a young child, the patience she displayed in listening to the stories of her elders and her obsession with drawing set her apart from other children. At times, she has felt that her family failed to value her work and that it was rejected by her own community. She recounts experiences in which others used her work without her permission and without compensating her for it. For example, early in her career when she was struggling to support her infant son, a local department store created a line of stationery using her drawings and did not adequately compensate her. Much later when she was an established artist, someone who had purchased her work thought he had the right to use it on the cover of a professional directory without her consent. On more than one occasion, a “friend” has taken work from her to sell and the work somehow disappears. Perhaps because of these incidents or for her own reasons, Aminah usually prefers to maintain her structured and solitary routine and limit social and business contacts. Her work is her safe haven and when she feels pressured for any reason, she retreats inside her house, locks the door, turns off the phone, and returns to her work. On other occasions, however, she demonstrates her ease of connecting with people and her interest in engaging communities. For example, she is a very willing participant in lectures, panel discussions, workshops, and one-on-one conversations arranged in connection with her exhibitions. She is warm, engaging, and interested in encouraging people, especially young people, to secure a foundation of self-confidence and self-identity by remembering and honoring the past.
On a Sunday afternoon in July at the opening of her 2007 exhibition, *Along Water Street* at the Columbus Museum of Art, Aminah read *To Be A Drum*, a book she had illustrated and that was written by Evelyn Coleman. She invited all the children in the standing-room-only crowd to come and sit with her on the stage of the auditorium. She asked the children to put their ears to the floor and listen for the sound of the earth’s heartbeat—the drumbeat of African-American courage, creativity, and history described in the book. At first, few of the children “heard” anything. By the end of the story, after Aminah encouraged the children to clap, and hum, and stomp, all of them could hear and feel the earth’s heartbeat, in the same way the children in the book had learned to feel and hear. It was a magical moment. When I asked the children if they had any questions for Aminah, several hands shot up. Most of the questions had to do with Aminah’s age and early artistic efforts. One adult managed to slip in a question and asked Aminah if she ever had a mental block that kept her from doing her work. At first, I thought Aminah was avoiding the question because she said she always has her “stuff” around her—paint, paper, rags, buttons, and old furniture. She didn’t mention the endless supply of stories from Uncle Alvin and Aunt Cornelia or the memories of Sydney and her mother and father, or her dreams for the future that rag on and on, but I think she had them in mind when she finished her reply by saying, “Every day there’s a new sunrise and a new sunset.”

Like the inside and outside of Aminah’s house, I, too, have been marked by her presence. She is the consummate teacher who uses her work and her whole being to impart her wisdom to others. As a result of our relationship, I have come to understand that what seemed exotic and strange about African and African-American culture and
traditions is highly understandable and logical. Like all religions, African cosmology is an attempt to explain the unknowable mysteries of life and death. I now realize how crucial the knowledge of one’s past is in establishing one’s identity and self-confidence. I have a new respect for the stories of my own family and an awareness of the need to pass them on to my children. Aminah has reinforced my belief in the power of art to communicate, inform, bring about change, and mark in a positive way the many people it touches.
CHAPTER 4

SYMPHONIC POEM: EXHIBITION AND RESPONSE

This chapter examines the development of the Symphonic Poem exhibition. I discuss insider/outsider issues as they relate to the artist and museum workers and to my own situation as an educator/curator. The challenge facing the museum is to transmit and honor the specific cultural voice of an outsider to an audience of insiders and outsiders. The second part of this chapter presents visitor responses to the exhibition through the results of a survey I conducted with more than 100 visitors to the exhibition and through examples of poetry inspired by Aminah’s work. The results of the survey and the poetry reflect the meaning-making of visitors and help me determine the success of this effort to transmit and honor Aminah’s voice.

Exhibition

The idea to organize a major retrospective exhibition at the Columbus Museum of Art focusing on the work of Aminah Brenda Lynn Robinson began in the late 1990s with Irvin Lippman, the museum’s director at the time and Annegreth Nill, the curator of contemporary art during this period. The planned exhibition was to build on the close relationship the museum had with the artist beginning with her participation in an exhibition as a teenager in the 1950s. In 1990, the museum presented a solo exhibition of her work, Pages in History. Based on the success of this smaller exhibition and continued public interest in the artist, the director and curator placed the exhibition on the museum
schedule. Envisioning this as a major exhibition for the museum, Annegreth and other staff from marketing, education, development, and curatorial affairs developed a budget that included a major publication and resources for each of the relevant departments.

Originally, the exhibition was scheduled to open in 2000, but the date was pushed back several times. Interestingly, my involvement as an educator/curator materialized, at least in part, because the curatorial staff was over burdened. In normal practice, educators were included in the exhibition team, but the team did not meet until after the scope of the exhibition and its checklist had been determined. In the case of *Symphonic Poem*, it became apparent that the exhibition and catalogue would be complex and that a single curator could not handle the many details necessary to complete the project on time. Because of my relationship with the artist and my knowledge of her work, the museum’s director asked me to become involved in the exhibition. When the director outlined my responsibilities, which included completing the selection of objects; organizing the accompanying catalogue; writing a biographical essay and a chronology for the catalogue; placing objects and helping to design the physical space; and developing the interpretive materials for the exhibition, I realized that my role would be equivalent to that of the curator. As a result, I asked to be named co-curator of the exhibition and this was readily agreed upon. Although I had served in the past as curator for a number of family oriented exhibitions including a major, permanent interactive exhibition for children and families, my position at the museum was as an educator and not a curator. As I knew intuitively at the time and would confirm through my research several years later, educators rarely serve as curators or co-curators for major exhibitions. An educator who serves as a curator runs counter to the organizational plan of most art
museums. This was the case at the Columbus Museum of Art. Even though the concept of exhibition teams that include educators is widespread, the structure that separates museum staff into departments makes it difficult for anyone who is not a curator to share in the responsibilities of organizing an exhibition. I knew that routine activities in the curatorial department, such as access to documentation records, storage, photography, and loan forms, would require special arrangements for me. Curatorial support staff, steeped in their own responsibilities, would not have time or authorization to assist someone outside the department. After a number of lengthy discussions and some soul-searching, I accepted this role, but not without reservations that related to placing myself in a position that was a departure from “normal” museum procedure. I believe that the outcome was extremely positive and warrants the consideration of a model in which this type of curator and educator collaboration might become the norm—not the result of crisis intervention. This would require a complete rethinking and reordering of museum organization in many museums.

I became involved in the exhibition in the summer of 2001. The unalterable date for the opening of the exhibition was scheduled for December 2002 and a partial checklist of objects had been developed. In order to write about the exhibition for both the catalogue and the exhibition didactics, my idea was to interview the artist. Beginning in August 2001, I spent eight months interviewing Aminah. My objective was to link the voice of the artist with the viewer whenever possible. I wanted to ask Aminah to speak about the objects while we were both looking at them so that my questions and her responses would echo the questions a visitor would be likely to have when viewing the exhibition. The interviews took place at the museum where many of the objects were
being stored and at the artist’s home. At the same time that the interviews were taking place, I began working with Annegreth to determine which objects would be included in the exhibition. Annegreth and her assistant had been working on identifying and locating Aminah’s work and compiling a checklist for the exhibition for several years. Aminah was most cooperative and generous with her time in regard to anything that had to do with the exhibition. She allowed us access to her work, to any contextual documentation that existed, and to her library of books, catalogues, news clippings, and letters. When I asked about certain works that I would like to include in the exhibition, she was quick to provide information and, if she still had the work, she would climb to her second floor and find it immediately. However, she would rarely offer this information without first being asked directly about it. My familiarity with her work over many years was an important benefit of my involvement.

After Annegreth and I determined which objects would be in the exhibition, we grouped them thematically. _The Grounding_ included work about Aminah’s immediate family, the people who had inspired her art, and events that gave shape to her life. _The Neighborhoods_ and _Pages in History_ reflected her research and documentation of historic figures and communities. _Journeys_ included her work that was inspired by travel in this country and abroad. _The Book_ featured the original art for some of her published books, her journals, and her limited editions printed books. In the last section of the exhibition, we constructed a replica of Aminah’s backyard studio, _The Doll House_. We moved over 75 objects from the actual structure (see Figure 3) in Aminah’s backyard to the museum. Visitors to the exhibition could peer into the Doll House to view dozens of three-dimensional figures and vignettes that Aminah had assembled, hand-tooled leather
pouches that the artist made, and the workbench where she carved most of the woodcuts for her limited edition books. The construction of a replica of Aminah’s Doll House studio in the exhibition raised a number questions that I discuss in Exhibitions: Excellence and Exploitation, Chapter 2.

The interviews I conducted with Aminah occurred approximately 10 to 15 hours per week over an eight-month period and became the basis for the entries in the exhibition catalogue that accompanied more than 100 color plates of the artist’s work. I edited the entries for use as extended labels in the exhibition itself. Other educational elements of the exhibition included the production of a video, taped music for the galleries, a listening station in which the artist read a poem, supportive photographs, and the artist’s journals and manuscripts. Art historian and curator Mark Rosenthal (2002) points out that a thematic exhibition requires more text and curatorial voice, while an exhibition of the work of a contemporary artist is the result of a collaboration between the artist and the curators and that the artist should “have a heavy hand” (pp. 77) in shaping both the exhibition and the catalogue. Aminah was an active partner in every step of the exhibition process and the interviews she had so graciously agreed to do allowed her voice to be heard throughout the exhibition and catalogue.

Related Programs

Program development was guided by the main exhibition themes found in Aminah’s work: the importance of learning from the past and transmitting the story to the next generation; the human connections among people regardless of their geographic location; and the ability of human beings to be transformed in a positive way in response to both uplifting and devastating life experiences. Aminah’s work is about her particular
story of family and community, but it is also about the universal experience of family and community that all human beings experience in some form. Part of the artist’s goal is to inspire others to become aware of the significance of their own stories. This intent of the artist led to exhibition-related programming and materials that encouraged the public to understand Aminah’s work and to also consider the importance of their own stories. These programs and materials came in many forms: a day-long symposium, three professional development opportunities for educators, a classroom resource packet, a public conversation with the artist, an extensive school tour program and related studio, student exhibitions, and a variety of programs for families.

In order to examine Aminah’s work in light of transmitting heritage, we organized a day-long symposium and invited the catalogue essayists, Kenneth W. Goings, chair of African and African American Studies at The Ohio State University; Ramona Austin, then the Director of the Hampton University Museum and Archives in Hampton, Virginia, and Leslie King-Hammond, the dean of graduate studies, The Maryland Institute College of Art in Baltimore to participate. Yale professor Robert Farris Thompson, who is an authority on African and African-American art and author of Flash of the Spirit (1983), was our keynote speaker. Aminah opened the symposium with an enthralling overview of her work and its historical basis and, at the end of the day, audience members participated by submitting questions and comments to the panel of scholars. One participant commented in the written evaluation:

I was amazed that the museum would sponsor such an extraordinary group of lecturers about African-American art. I did not think the museum had such a commitment to African-American art and artists. The event more than met my expectations and those of my colleagues.
This comment is revealing because it demonstrates this visitor’s perception that the museum is not interested in African-American art and artists. If the museum is to be relevant to a diverse audience, this is the type of perception we need to change through exhibitions, collections, programs, visitor services, and all operations.

Another person who attended the symposium was moved by the experience and wrote:

What a phenomenal day Saturday was. I shall live gloriously in the memory for some time. Every speaker was so rich in knowledge, experience, and texture of life. I hated to have it end. Aminah’s enormous generosity of spirit makes my soul expand. How enriched we all are by her presence.

Another program that attracted a large audience was a conversation with the artist. Annegreth and I talked with the artist and asked her a number of questions. The audience indicated that they appreciated the intimacy of this format. One respondent said, “One second spent in Aminah Robinson’s company is worth lifetimes of others.” Another noted that he or she was inspired by Aminah’s spirit, philosophy, and faith and another felt the conversation gave him a “sense of the artist’s personality.” Someone else commented that the program helped her better understand “the mystery of the artistic process.” Like the symposium, this program had a mystical or magical aura that all those present seemed to be aware of and that emanated from Aminah’s presence, from her quiet and prayerful delivery, and from the content of her stories which were, at times, tragic, humorous, touching, and forceful.

Programs for children and families included a collaboration with Columbus’ ProMusica Chamber Orchestra. At the Museum, ProMusica performed part of their original composition for Elijah’s Angel, the Christmas/Hanukah story about woodcarver
Elijah Pierce that was written by Michael Rosen and illustrated by Aminah. We also worked with the Phoenix Youth Theater on their adaptation of *To Be A Drum*, the book by Evelyn Coleman that Aminah had illustrated. The theater company adapted this book about African-American history for the stage, added music, and presented the play as part of their season series. We partnered with the theater to have school groups tour the exhibition and then see the play at the theater which was a short bus ride away. The museum docents made sure the students had the opportunity to experience the original art for *To Be A Drum*. This proved to be a very rich experience in which the students could understand Aminah’s concept of a symphonic poem in which storytelling, music, drama, and the visual arts all come together. Opera Columbus worked with a group of children from across the city to present an operatic version of Aminah’s *Symphonic Poem*. More than 800 visitors attended My Neighborhood! My World!, a family event that celebrated Aminah’s work with dance and drum performances and African-inspired storytelling. Participants enjoyed art, music, food, and performances while engaging in a variety of hands-on art activities that included book-making and needlework.

A capacity number of 16,000 students participated in school tours. Many of the teachers who brought students attended one, two, or three of the workshops for educators we presented. Aminah spoke about her work at one of the workshops that was attended by 200 area teachers and afterwards teachers shared the lesson plans they had developed using Aminah’s art. Visiting teachers also received our classroom resource packets containing slides, a slide script, and interdisciplinary classroom activities. A special poster with lesson plans was circulated to 4,000 area teachers. The poster invited
teachers to have their students create “Unwritten Love Letters” inspired by Aminah’s hand-painted, mixed media series made from envelopes. We exhibited student art that was inspired by *Symphonic Poem* in our Nationwide Studio space.

**Insider/Outsider Issues**

Although Aminah vigorously denied any concerns regarding the situation in which two white curators were organizing the exhibition of an African-American artist, Annegreth and I were aware of our outsider status in this respect. Black feminists (Collins, P. H., 1997; hooks, 1989) believe that no one’s perspective is neutral and that a central requirement of black feminist thought is the voice of black women intellectuals. However, in emphasizing the centrality of the voices of black women intellectuals, Collins examines:

> The importance of coalitions with Black men, white women, people of color, and other groups with distinctive standpoints. Such coalitions are essential in order to foster other groups’ contributions as critics, teachers, advocates, and disseminators of a self-defined Afrocentric feminist standpoint…. The importance of Black women’s leadership in producing Black feminist thought does not mean that others cannot participate” (p. 253).

Similarly, bell hooks speaks about African-American artists who deal with issues of oppression in their work but also about the importance of the participation of non-African Americans in the discussion:

> African-American critics and/or artists who speak about our need to engage in ongoing dialogue with dominant discourse always risk being dismissed as assimilationist. There is a grave difference between that engagement with white culture which seeks to deconstruct, demystify, challenge, and transform and gestures of collaboration and complicity. We cannot participate in dialogue that is the mark of freedom and critical agency if we dismiss all work emerging from white western traditions. The assumption that the crisis of African Americans should or can only be
addressed by us must also be interrogated. Much of what threatens our collective well-being is the product of dominating structures. Racism is a white issue as much as it is a black one (1995, p.83).

Many scholars (e.g. Code, L. in Ladson-Billings; Narayan, K. in Ladson-Billings, 2000) studying insider/outsider relationships contend that the production of knowledge is greatly affected by the race, class, gender, ethnicity, and sexual orientation of the researcher in relation to the researched. Therefore, it is beneficial to have the researchers situate themselves in relation to the researched by stating their differences and revealing their reasons for undertaking the research (Ladson-Billings). Feminist scholar Linda Alcoff (1995) believes anyone who is considering speaking for someone else through research should seriously question themselves concerning the impetus to speak in the first place; the effects of their own location and context; their own accountability and responsibility for what is said; and the possible effects of their written or spoken words (pp.111-113).

I have been privileged to have the opportunity to work closely with Aminah and develop an exhibition, written materials, and programs about her. I know I am but one of many voices to examine, interpret, and respond to her art and that there will be many more voices— both African American and non-African Americans—in the future. Aminah welcomes the multiplicity of voices that respond to her work and, in fact, they serve as her primary motivation for creating it.

When working with contemporary artists, curators have the luxury of encouraging artists to speak for themselves. My extensive interviews with Aminah became the basis for the objects illustrated in the catalogue and the extended labels in the exhibition. Even though I used her words directly from transcriptions and asked her to approve each
quotation, I recognize that as the researcher I exercised control over what was asked as well as what was included and what was excluded. “The products of an interview are the outcome of a socially situated activity where the responses are passed through the role-playing and impression management of both the interviewer and respondent,” observes Dingwell (as cited in Denzin & Lincoln, p. 664). However, the risk of a minimal amount of distortion is far outweighed because the stories are essential to understanding Aminah’s work.

Since the early 1980s, when they began relying on the interview process as an essential research technique, some feminist theorists realized the benefits of encouraging a comfortable, trusting relationship between the interviewer and interviewee, as opposed to a scientific approach that valued distance and objectivity (Reinharz, 1992). Since Aminah and I had already established a trusting relationship, we avoided the professional distance that psychology scholar Donald Polkinghorne (1983) believes creates an atmosphere of unknown expectations and questioning of roles that can result in misinformation (p. 268). The object of the interview is to create a written history from the oral history of the artist’s life and work in her own words. “Biography and oral history have the potential of bringing women ‘into’ history and making the female experience part of the written record,” observes Reinharz, “This form of research thereby revises history, in the sense of forcing us to modify previously published accounts of events that did not take women’s experience seriously” (p. 134). Through the interview process, Aminah’s stories have now been amplified, documented in a written form, and made available to the public.
Visitor Response

If today’s museums are to be valued interpreters of culture, we must constantly examine our exhibitions and programs and assess visitor response. I have chosen to analyze *Symphonic Poem* from two different perspectives. The first is through a visitor survey and the second is through poetry inspired by the exhibition. Visitors’ perceptions of their experience of an exhibition is an assessment of whether or not the museum’s educational goals for the exhibition have been met. Visitors, who approach the exhibition with the goal of writing poetry, tend to focus in great detail on the particular work of art that attracts them. Unlike the casual visitor, the writer has the additional task of turning his or her response into the written language of poetry. Their writing becomes another, more formal, means of assessing visitor meaning-making.

*Visitor Survey*

In its Columbus venue, *Symphonic Poem* attracted 70,000 visitors during the twelve weeks it was on view. Throughout the period, 110 visitors completed a survey (see Appendix B) I developed concerning their experience of the exhibition. The results of this survey have provided a deep and rich understanding of what the exhibition meant to a sampling of visitors. The purpose of the survey was to determine whether or not visitors connected the work in the exhibition with their own experiences and knowledge and whether or not they acquired new information and insights. Furthermore, I was interested in determining whether or not the respondents’ gender and/or race affected their responses. Table 4.1 details the race and gender of respondents. My discussion of the data is grouped accordingly: female white; male white; female black; male black. I include comments from the three respondents who do not fall into one of the four...
categories, when these are relevant. Since so much of Aminah’s work concerns particular
references to people, places, and events in Columbus, I was interested in comparing
responses of visitors from the Columbus area with those who were not. I also wanted to
know if visitors connected with the objectives my co-curator and I hoped the exhibition
communicated through the artist and her work: the importance of family and community;
the value in learning from the past; the necessity to transcend loss and tragedy; and the
significance of the artist’s materials and techniques.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Total (Race)</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Caucasian</td>
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<td>43</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>14.5</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
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<td>30</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>9.5</td>
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<td>40</td>
</tr>
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<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total (gender)</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Total number of participants = 110

Table 4.1
Respondents and their gender and race

**Methodology, Visitor Groups, and Demographics**

At the Museum’s information desk after visitors had exited the exhibition, either
customer service staff or I asked random adult visitors if they would be willing to
complete the survey. In most cases, visitors did not know about the survey until they had
already seen the exhibition. The instrument included both open-ended and check-off
questions. I piloted the original questionnaire with ten respondents and, as a result,
reformulated several of the questions. Respondents were seated at a counter in the museum lobby and took between 15 and 20 minutes to complete the survey. Most of the responses were collected during afternoons and included those who paid to enter the museum during the week and those who entered on Sundays when admission was free. Upon completion, visitors received a *Symphonic Poem* pin. A museum intern helped me collate the results of the survey.

Forty percent of those who completed the survey were African American. This represented a higher percentage of African-American visitors to the museum than usual. This figure supports research that indicates that minorities will attend exhibitions that they perceive in advance relate to their own cultural identity (Hooper-Greenhill, 1999).

Of those surveyed, more than 73% came with friends or family. The interactions that these visitors had with their companions affected their understanding of the exhibition to varying degrees and probably affected the learning experience for each individual. Falk and Dierking (2000) point out that social groups such as these facilitate collaborative learning in which members of the group help each other interpret the art by sharing their personal connections to it and reinforcing commonly held beliefs.

Sixty-four per cent of those surveyed were from Columbus, 28% from other parts of Ohio, and 8% from other states (Michigan, Idaho, Wisconsin, Massachusetts, Kentucky, Georgia). This group of visitors from beyond the central Ohio area provided responses to compare with responses from those who live in Columbus.

*Visitor Connections*

**Did the exhibition or any work of art in it trigger a particular memory, story, or experience from your life?** Of the African-American and Caucasian visitors who
responded to this question, 83% indicated that they connected Aminah’s work with their own memories, stories, and experiences. The percentage of white and black respondents who answered yes to this question was almost identical. The percentage of white males responding positively was higher than any of the other groups and white females was the lowest.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondent Groups</th>
<th>Yes</th>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Females:</td>
<td>37 (77%)</td>
<td>11 (23%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Males</td>
<td>15 (94%)</td>
<td>1 (6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>52 (82%)</td>
<td>12 (19%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African-American</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Females</td>
<td>28 (90%)</td>
<td>3 (10%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Males:</td>
<td>10 (83%)</td>
<td>2 (17%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>38 (88%)</td>
<td>5 (12%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total of all responding</td>
<td>90 (84%)</td>
<td>17 (16%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.2
Exhibition prompted visitors’ memories, stories, or experiences

White Females

More than 75% of the white females indicated that the exhibition triggered a particular memory, story, or experience from their lives. Many comments from this group reflected the women’s recollections of childhood experiences. Aminah’s cloth painting and sculpture about the winter quarters of the Sellesville Circus (see Figure 11) in Columbus prompted this recollection, “As a young child, [I] would see the Sells Circus
unload from their train…we would get out of school to watch them unload.” Others recalled childhood memories growing up in Cleveland, Cincinnati, and New Jersey. Respondents from both Columbus and Cleveland mentioned characters like those in Aminah’s *Mt. Vernon Avenue Memory Maps* (see Figure 18): a ragman, a paper man, and a leaf man. One woman mentioned that her father had a drugstore on the street. Several women remembered making art as children and one wrote, “When I was a kid, I made these little figures I called ‘sticky, stony tar.’ They were made in the heat of summer when the asphalt bubbles.” This recollection relates to Aminah’s use of hogmawg (see Figures 13 and 20), her homemade mixture of mud, pig’s grease, leaves, sticks, glue and lime. Another woman recalled riding the bus to Saturday classes for children at the Columbus Art School.

For a number of women, the exhibition triggered memories of listening to their mothers and/or grandmothers talking with friends or working with other women on a quilt for new baby in the family. One woman mentioned that she was reminded of her grandmother by Aminah’s *RagGonNons* (see Figure 7):

She [my grandmother] always had a jar of buttons I would play with as a child. I would sort them by color and size and string them together with a shoestring. When my grandmother passed away, her estate was auctioned. However, my uncle claimed her sewing machine as a gift for me. In the drawer of the sewing cabinet, I found the jar of buttons.

Respondents connected their own travel experiences with Aminah’s paintings and *RagGonNons*. “I lived in Guatemala for three years,” recalled one woman, “I am struck by the similar use of color and detail in their textile work. Also, many of the pieces talk about community—a village made because of those within it.” Aminah’s depiction of the slave quarters on Goree Island (see Figure 2) off the coast of Senegal reminded a woman
of her visit to a slave house in southern Illinois and another woman was reminded of her own trip to Goree Island. For one woman, the exhibition triggered memories of traveling to Russia to adopt her infant son.

Four of the women interviewed mentioned “making do.” One mentioned “living on a little bit of money but lots of family love.” Another recalled the use of found objects in art-making when buying new art supplies and materials was difficult, “The unity of family and creating with what you have rather than what you can purchase.”

African-American Females

Ninety percent of the African American woman replied that they connected their own memories, stories, and experiences to the exhibition. A woman from Detroit remembered riding the bus with her babysitter to Kresge’s, buying popcorn, and feeding the pigeons. Another mentioned growing up in the West End of Cincinnati, family stories, and how the “community banned together as a family.” A woman recalled her father encouraging her to draw and to imagine and another fondly remembered seeing Aminah work on her “music box chair (see Figure 13).” A woman raised in West Virginia mentioned that Aminah’s cloth painting, Makin’ Sweet Soap (see Figure 19) reminded her of the neighbors who would “come together to can vegetables, make butter, and a host of other things” in the late summer and early fall.

Several women noted the stories their mothers told them. Four mentioned particular stories about Poindexter Village, Mt. Vernon Avenue, and the Blackberry Patch told to them by their mother or grandmother. Another remembered “a warm and bonding time” shopping with her grandmother on Mt. Vernon Avenue and more recently taking her own daughter to the area.
Six of the women mentioned particular places on Mt. Vernon Avenue. For example, one woman noted that her grandmother lived across the street from Buckeye Federal, the same bank depicted in *The Line* (see Figure 12). One respondent recalled going to school with Aminah and another remembered a visit to Aminah’s house where she watched the artist work on her chair. Aminah’s depiction of Goree Island reminded a woman of her own trip there.

**While Males**

Aminah’s painting, *Makin’ Sweet Soap* (see Figure 19) reminded one man of his own family making soap. Another remembered family stories that were told on trips to Connecticut. A man from Cleveland recalled a man on a horse-drawn cart selling paper and rags and calling out, “Paperags.” Another man recalled his childhood in Columbus and another stories about the Ragman and the Iceman. Two respondents mentioned that Aminah’s work from Israel brought to mind their own trips there. The reconstructed version of Aminah’s *Doll House* studio in the exhibition inspired another man’s memories of a visit to North Dakota where he visited “a beautiful barn of remembrance” filled with tools and every North Dakota license plate since statehood that had been collected by a retired farmer. He connected Aminah’s *Doll House* with the North Dakota barn and indicated that they are both structures of remembrance but represent completely difference heritages. Another man wrote that the sound of the music boxes Aminah uses in her work “brought back a flood of memories.”

A teacher recalled having his students create a project about the Middle Passage.
The students did not seem particularly interested until a parent visited the classroom and began telling stories about the Middle Passage. Another was reminded of the stories about Jewish slaves during biblical times.

**African American Males**

Some of the African American men who were surveyed connected the specificity of Aminah’s subject matter with their own experiences. One recalled his childhood in the Poindexter Village apartment complex. Another visitor, who was a teacher, recalled having Aminah’s son, Sydney, in his electronics class. For another, Aminah’s button work reminded him of being a child and looking for hours at the buttons in his mother’s button box. Aminah’s drawing of a wake reminded one visitor about the recent death of a cousin. Another man noted, “Aminah Robinson’s work made my heart feel good. She had vivid images with buttons of families. It also reminded me how blessed I am that I didn’t have to go through the African slave trade.”

**Asian Respondents**

Two Asian respondents both connected Aminah’s work to the “busy streets” of India where they grew up. The Asian woman noted, “The Columbus street reminded me of a street in Jodhpur, India. The ethnic character, colors, diversity of life was enchanting.”

**Conclusions**

The stories, memories, and experiences that both female and male African-American and Caucasian respondents described had much in common. Individuals in each of these groups connected what they saw in the exhibition with their knowledge or lack of knowledge concerning African-American history, their childhood memories, and
stories told by older family members. Slightly more African-American women (90%) stated that the exhibition triggered their own stories than did Caucasian women (83%). More Caucasian males answered this question affirmatively than did African-American males. Both Caucasian and African-American women repeatedly mentioned the strong ties among themselves and their mothers and grandmothers. A few individuals in each of the groups recalled family stories they were told, but in the category of African-American women, the idea of stories and storytelling was a more frequent theme. Twenty-five percent of the African-American women mentioned the actual word “story” or “stories” and emphasized the importance of stories and storytelling in their responses. One African-American woman observed that Aminah’s mother handed down history to the artist and “that’s what women in the Black culture do.” The responses of African Americans more often than responses of others recounted particular experiences on Mt. Vernon Avenue and references to the details documented in Aminah’s work such as specific streets and businesses in the neighborhood. Several African Americans recalled personal encounters with the artist herself. Overall, a slightly higher percentage of African Americans (88%) than Caucasians (82%) reported that the exhibition triggered their own memories, stories, or experiences.

Aminah’s use of buttons and music boxes stirred warm memories for respondents in all groups. Similarly, individuals in all groups recalled seeing or hearing about some version of a “ragman” or “vegetable man” who roamed the streets of their own neighborhoods in Columbus or other cities such as Cleveland and Detroit.
Perceived Learning by Visitors

Did you learn anything new about the history of Columbus, Africa, the Middle Passage, slavery, Sapelo Island, Israel, etc.? Ninety percent of those who responded to this question indicated that they did learn something new about the history of Columbus, Africa, the Middle Passage and/or the various other topics that are subject matter in Aminah’s art. Regardless of color or gender, the response of those indicating they learned something new from the exhibition, were very similar except for the small sampling of African American-males. Only 6 out of 10 responded affirmatively to this question.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondent groups</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Females</td>
<td>41 (87%)</td>
<td>6 (13%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Males</td>
<td>15 (94%)</td>
<td>1 (6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>56 (89%)</td>
<td>7 (11%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Females</td>
<td>31 (94%)</td>
<td>2 (6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Males</td>
<td>6 (60%)</td>
<td>4 (40%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>37 (86%)</td>
<td>6 (14%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total of all responding</td>
<td>93 (88%)</td>
<td>13 (12%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.3
Perceived Learning by visitors

White Females

Many white female respondents mentioned that they did not know about various Columbus subjects Aminah depicts in her work such as the Sellsville Circus, Poindexter
Village, the general history of the African-American community. Others mentioned that the exhibition offered them the opportunity to add to their previous knowledge of Elijah Pierce and Mt. Vernon Avenue. One respondent observed, “[Aminah’s] work gave me a whole new perspective and light on what kind of community Poindexter Village was.” Three women noted that they had never heard of King Abubakari (see Figure 17) until they saw Aminah’s RagGonNon about this African king who some scholars believe reached the Americas more than 150 years before Columbus. Eight respondents mentioned that the story of Sapelo Island (see Figure 14) was new to them. One woman noted that before visiting the exhibition, she knew nothing about Ohio’s fugitive slave laws. Three others did not know about the horror of mothers’ throwing their children overboard during the Middle Passage (see Figure 6).

Some visitors from Columbus were unaware of the significant role Columbus played in the Underground Railroad. Others were unaware of the back-to-Africa, Marcus Garvy marches in Columbus, or the Ward family’s involvement in the Underground Railroad. Aminah documented this event in the sculpture, *John T. Ward Transporting Fugitive Slaves in Columbus, Ohio, to Freedom, 1800s* (see Figure 20). One visitor wrote, “I had never heard of the Middle Passage and was so moved by the explanation our docent gave. I heard of Sapelo Island but Aminah’s visuals made it come to life.” One visitor pointed out that she hadn’t thought about the similarities among diverse cultures that are represented, for example, in Aminah’s scenes of marketplaces from

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8 Aminah’s Uncle Alvin told her about King Abubakari and she later read about him in Van Sertima’s *They Came Before Columbus* (Random House, 1976).
9 Aminah learned through her Aunt Cornelia that some of her ancestors were brought to Sapelo Island, Georgia, as slaves in the 19th century.
10 Ohio enacted laws in 1804 and 1807 restricting the rights of Blacks.
Addis Ababa, Jerusalem, and Santiago. One visitor was fascinated by the idea of “seeing with four ears” that Aminah discusses in the exhibition video. This is the idea that both her eyes and ears are sensitive receptors for perceiving the world.

*African-American Females*

African-American women indicated they learned something new in the exhibition, and many pointed out that it confirmed or built on what they already knew. An African-American woman mentioned that the information about Columbus’ Reverend Poindexter and his role in the Underground Railroad was new to her. Two respondents mentioned that they did not know about the Ward Moving and Storage Company’s participation in the Underground Railroad. Three women mentioned that they did not know that Poindexter Village was one of the first federally funded housing projects in the United States. Another observed that she was unaware of the importance of chickens, which are depicted in several of Aminah’s paintings. In another response, someone who had moved to Columbus from New York City did not know about Sellsville (see Figure 11) and compared it to a part of the New York City amusement park called Freedomland that in the 1960s re-created vignettes of late 19th-century Americana.

Six African-American women remarked that they knew nothing about Sapelo Island or the slaves that ran it, prior to the exhibition. One of these mentioned that Aminah’s work made her feel as though she was “walking among the people.” Another woman observed that Aminah’s depiction of the Atlantic slave trade brought this “historical event to life” for her.
White males

Two respondents mentioned that they learned about Poindexter and other neighborhoods and now had a better idea of what it was like to live there. Others mentioned that they did not know anything about Sellsville before the exhibition. Another mentioned he had no knowledge of the emancipation celebration held in Columbus or the reason a street in central Ohio was called Africa Road. One man noted that the daily life of those in what he called a “lower income” black community was “the same as everyone else’s” in regard to shopping, vendors, and street life. One respondent felt that the exhibition helped him understand what it looked like to walk down Mt. Vernon Avenue in Columbus or walk through Harlem in the 1940s.

One male respondent mentioned that he did not know about people jumping off slave ships and another was moved by Aminah’s graphic depiction of this scene. Another mentioned that he never knew about Ohio’s Black Laws. Three of those surveyed mentioned that the information about Sapelo Island they found in Aminah’s work was new to them.

African-American Males

One African-American respondent mentioned learning that Poindexter was one of the first public housing apartments in the country and another had never heard of Sellsville. Another observed that the exhibition made him think about the idea that different cultures have a lot in common.

Conclusions

Many respondents, regardless of race or gender, had similar observations and comments concerning what they had learned in the exhibition. Many of the visitors noted
detailed factual information that was new to them. In a number of cases, the respondents indicated that they linked the new information to what they already knew. One respondent observed, “What I have learned is images, pictures, what it feels like, what it looks like, to be there. Through Aminah Robinson’s art, we walk down Mt. Vernon Avenue, through Harlem…”

Change in Views of African-American History

Did the exhibition affect your view of African-American history in Columbus or of African American history in general?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondents</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Females</td>
<td>32 (84%)</td>
<td>6 (16%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Males</td>
<td>3 (75%)</td>
<td>1 (25%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>35 (83%)</td>
<td>7 (17%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Females</td>
<td>17 (85%)</td>
<td>3 (15%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Males</td>
<td>8 (67%)</td>
<td>4 (33%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>25 (78%)</td>
<td>7 (22%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total of all responding</td>
<td>60 (81%)</td>
<td>14 (19%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.4
Changes in visitors’ views of African-American history

White Females

Many of the women indicated that the exhibition had definitely increased their understanding of African-American history. Several noted that Aminah’s visual
representations of people and events brought historic events such as the Middle Passage, slavery, and the Underground Railroad to life and served to counter the omission of these events from past history. “How wonderful for Columbus,” wrote one woman, “that someone was writing its history through art. The Black community, I imagine, was pretty much left out in serious historical consideration.” Another mentioned that Aminah’s art emphasized the rich culture and history of the old neighborhoods. One woman noted that she saw very few African Americans when she was young because they were confined to certain areas of the city. If they ventured beyond 17th Street, the woman recalled that the KKK would “burn a cross and they would leave.” Another woman observed that Aminah’s work helped fill a void in the recording of the history of the Black community and another that the depiction of the Middle Passage made the historical event more poignant and real. “Being a history major, one respondent observed, “I had read about the slave trade, and recently seen some TV documentaries. I feel certain that the information I know just scratches the surface of the real truth of the situation.”

One woman connected the suffering of African Americans during the Middle Passage with their deep religiosity and “their great sense of community and helping each other.” Another commented on the importance of oral history in the African-American community and another mentioned African American’s respect for their ancestors’ voices. One woman was moved by the artist’s pride in her community and another noted that Aminah’s visual stories helped her see “how much we are all alike.” Another commented, “I know my family history; it is fascinating to know other people’s roots. [It]
makes us realize how much we are all alike.” Similarly, another visitor related Aminah’s depiction of history and family to her own “British, Scottish, Irish, German roots.” One visitor pointed out, “No one can come away unmoved.”

**African-American Females**

Five respondents noted that the exhibition increased their awareness and appreciation of African-American history and culture in Columbus. Three mentioned that they were unaware of the extent of the involvement of Columbus citizens in the Underground Railroad. Several mentioned that this activism made them proud. One person was saddened by the deterioration of the Mt.Vernon and Poindexter community.

**White Males**

Almost all of those who responded said that their knowledge of African-American history was deepened and two mentioned that the exhibition made the history seem more personal. One visitor mentioned that he better understood the depth of Columbus’ involvement in the Emancipation. One male respondent recalled:

> When working downtown I used to choose on purpose to drive home to Bexley along Long Street. The street evoked the sense of a past community which this art especially explores. The exhibition provides an answer to a question. It is layered—it is about Columbus, it is about the African-American experience—but it is also about me, my town, my family, and my history.

Another person noted that until he saw the exhibition, he had no sense of African-American experience and life because he grew up on the west side of Columbus, where few African Americans lived. One person expressed his sadness that the lively Mt.Vernon community is lost. One said that the exhibition gave him “a positive feeling about this history.”
African-American Males

One of the African-American respondents noted that the exhibition reinforced his knowledge of Black history and commented, “There is a ‘sweetness’ about the exhibit. A display of Black strength and determination.” Another said the exhibition made him proud of his African-American heritage and of the African-American contribution to Columbus. One person said he grew up with this history and knew it was extensive and another said, “I grew up with it, lived with it, and continue to live with it.” Another stated that the exhibition increased his appreciation of African-American history. One respondent commented that, “the truth about the African-American experience in this country is troubling.” A visitor from Cleveland was pleased that the Columbus Museum of Art presented the exhibition, “I was very impressed and comforted to know that Columbus gives equal opportunity to all talented artists.”

Conclusions

In answering the question about the effect of the exhibition on visitors’ understanding of African-American history, a number of white visitors observed that Aminah’s work helps to fill in aspects of African-American history that were often omitted from general accounts of history. Female and male white respondents were emotionally affected by the work and the themes that were represented. African-American respondents noted some specific information that was new to them, but they were already familiar with much of Aminah’s subject matter. Several African American visitors felt personal pride in the Aminah’s depiction of African-American history and culture. Both an African-American and a white visitor expressed sadness that Mt. Vernon Avenue is no longer the bustling, lively neighborhood that Aminah documented.
Exhibition Communication to Visitor

White Females

In answer to the question of what the exhibition communicated, female white visitors most often mentioned the artist herself and the time and effort she dedicated to her work, her ability to bring her subject matter to life through a variety of media, and the idea that her work is ongoing and never completed. They were also impressed with Aminah’s energy, her creative use of “scraps,” her “keen observation of community,” and the “visual expressiveness” of the images. One woman wrote that she was struck by potential “of a single human being who is truly inspired by being alive and passing the act of living on to her future.” Many visitors noted the capacity of the work to communicate emotions: love, pride, peace, and joy. One remarked:

The richness and abundance of the creativity of one person overwhelmed me. Aminah seems to be so full of ideas and the desire to communicate them. There seems to be a driving force within her that is like an erupting volcano that has taken over her life. She sees and hears things the rest of us aren’t even aware of.

Several visitors pointed out that Aminah’s work had deeply affected them because it transmitted community history in a very personal and human way. One visitor called Aminah’s work “the journaling of a woman’s life” and another noted, “The touch of the human hand touches future generation’s hearts.” Others mentioned that the work reflected the artist’s pride in her culture, community, and self. Four of the women mentioned that the exhibition increased their awareness of the struggles that African Americans have endured and the obstacles they have overcome. One commented that Aminah’s work represented “a deep-seeded pride in history, Black history, and the struggle.”
African-American Females

Many African-American women commented on the artist’s time, talent and effort in creating the work and her ability to capture the spirit of the human experience. A number of these respondents expressed a sense of pride and identity in Aminah’s depictions of family, community, and history. One woman described the subject matter of the work as “the history of Columbus, Ohio, I grew up with.” Another respondent commented that the exhibition communicated to her, “Aminah’s love of African-American history and Columbus” and another wrote that Aminah’s work demonstrates “a brilliant artist’s capacity to capture the African-American experience and human experience.” Another observed that Aminah’s work reminded her of “things forgotten” such as “a real sense of community.” For another, it was a reminder that Black history is “sometimes distorted.” Someone else concluded that the exhibition communicated to her “the vast Afro-American history of Columbus that included the negative effect the opening-up of ‘white’ Columbus had on the ‘Black’ commercial district.”

Two women found meaningful symbolism in Aminah’s use of buttons. One noted that buttons “link things together” and another that buttons represent the idea that “life can go on one button at a time” in spite of struggles and obstacles.

White Males

White males commented on the artist’s creativity, energy, imagination, and her ability to depict both joy and suffering and both the ordinary and extraordinary. A number of respondents focused on Aminah’s sense of history and community. One visitor observed, “History is life. Life is built on history. The artist attempts to teach both.” One person compared her art to poetry which he pointed out is sometimes divided into epic
(narrative) and lyric (meditative). “Her art is both,” he noted, “The iconic piece for me is the scroll in Dad’s Journey (see Figures 5 and 6). I am deeply moved….It tells a story of people through time (epic), but is a meditation on the wavy dimension and meanings of an experience (lyric).”

African-American Males

A number of African-American males felt that the exhibition was a testimony to the importance of the African-American community and its history. One visitor mentioned that the exhibition expressed “the beauty of the Black community and its often buried history.” Another mentioned that the exhibition demonstrated the importance of storytelling. For someone else, her work had religious significance and suggested the importance of “having faith in Jesus.” One person commented that the exhibition represented the “tremendous talent in the African-American community that is not known.” Another summarized the exhibition as a demonstration of the “importance of family, friends, community,” and the fact that “we all need each other to be whole.”

Conclusions

Many visitors, regardless of race or gender, commented on the talents, creativity, spirit, and determination of the artist herself. Similarly, many respondents had an emotional or spiritual response to the work. White visitors commented on aspects of the black community and the triumphs, and struggles of African Americans from the viewpoint of outsiders and African Americans commented on these same aspects as insiders. Outsiders voiced their respect and insiders their pride for African-American
history. Visitors in all categories stated that the exhibition communicated to them the importance of family and community and of researching and recording personal and communal history and transmitting it to the next generation.

*Exhibition Education Component Preferences*

In the survey, I asked visitors about their preferences regarding the use of educational information in exhibitions. Visitors were asked to select whether they preferred viewing an exhibition with museum staff or a guide; with an audio guide; on their own using supportive materials; a combination of a guided tour and using the supportive material as well; or viewing the art with no supportive information.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of educational components</th>
<th>% respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Viewing the work on their own and using text, labels, video, etc.</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audio tour</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guided tour with museum staff or guide</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guided tour + reading supportive information</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No supportive information</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.5

Visitor preferences regarding education components in exhibitions

The response is interesting because it indicates that the majority of this sampling of visitors prefers visiting an exhibition on their own. Our museum staff regards tours as a
desirable type of museum visit and, as a result, charges an extra fee for them or promotes guided tours as a benefit of membership. This survey result indicates that many people would prefer visiting an exhibition on their own rather than as part of a group tour.

Respondents to the survey were asked which educational components of *Symphonic Poem* they used. Supportive components of the exhibition included large text panels accompanied by photographs for each of the five sections of the exhibition; extended labels with contextual information and quotes from the artist for many of the objects; a ten-minute video about the artist and her work; copies of the book that accompanied the exhibition; labels with the object’s title, date, media, and lender; reproductions of an unpublished manuscript Aminah wrote to accompany her illustrations for *To Be a Drum* (Robinson, 1998).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Exhibition education components</th>
<th>% Visitors used</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Extended labels with artist’s quotes</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section text panels with photographs</td>
<td>74%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exhibition video</td>
<td>56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Object labels</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exhibition book, <em>Symphonic Poem</em></td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To Be a Drum manuscript</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.6

Visitor use of education components
Many of those responding indicated they used one or more of these supportive materials. While some visitors used each of these resources, the type of information preferred by the greatest number of visitors was the extended label in which Aminah told the story of each object in her own words.

**Additional Open-ended Feedback**

The final open-ended question of the survey asked visitors for additional comments about their experience of the exhibition. These comments indicate that visitors who completed the survey embraced the exhibition with great enthusiasm. Only two comments were negative. One concerned the crowded conditions in the gallery that made it difficult to hear a tour guide. Another respondent did not like Aminah’s work and questioned the museum’s reasons for organizing the exhibition. Several Columbus respondents expressed their pleasure with the museum for choosing to do an exhibition of a local artist. Several were pleased that they had the opportunity to see and hear Aminah in person at one of the programs held in conjunction with the exhibition. Visitors noted that they intended to come back again and again and that they hoped the exhibition would be able to travel to other parts of the country. African-American and white visitors complimented the museum for being friendly, welcoming, kind, and helpful.

Three different respondents mentioned that it was hard to resist touching the objects and one suggested having some type of hands-on activity in the exhibition. Another would have liked the video in the exhibition to be longer. All but three respondents said the amount of information in the exhibition was just right and three said it was too little. All who responded said they would recommend the exhibition to friends.
Overall Findings and Implications

Symphonic Poem succeeded in attracting a large number of African-American visitors who are not regular museum-goers. Clearly, one of the museum-wide goals of presenting this exhibition was to increase the attendance of African Americans. Audience development can be a “risky business” (Black, 2006, p. 47) for museums. If the museum is not committed to sustaining a long-term effort to attract and retain new audiences, first-time visitors will become one-time visitors. Efforts to broaden audiences must be organization-wide and thoughtfully conceived. The museum must carefully consider and articulate its goals, earmark adequate funding and staffing to involve community members, and have the organizational will to carry out the vision the museum and community conceive (Black, 2006). The museum is addressing this issue aggressively by developing a Web site focusing on Aminah’s work and planning a permanent Aminah Robinson Center at the museum.

Nearly 3/4 of the respondents who visited the exhibition attended with family and/or friends. This data supports research that estimates that 75% to 95% of visitors to museums are accompanied by friends and that only 5% to 25% attend by themselves (Draper’s study as cited in Vergo 1989). Since the majority of visitors to Symphonic Poem and to exhibitions in general, come in intergenerational and adult groups, exhibition organizers can design strategies to stimulate meaningful interaction among these groups. For example, in exhibitions such as Symphonic Poem, in which personal narrative is a major theme, the museum could provide the opportunity for visitors to share and record stories in much the same way the national Storycorps® program operates in
conjunction with National Public Radio. This program encourages people to record one another’s stories in special audio recording booths placed throughout the country. This is the type of programming we hope to include in the Aminah Robinson Center.

The survey results attest to the overwhelmingly positive response to the exhibition by those who visited it. Comments in response to the open-ended questions in the survey demonstrate the visitors’ appreciation of Aminah’s work and her creativity, dedication, spirit, and energy. In addition, this survey has helped validate the importance of the museum’s continued efforts to support and promote Aminah’s work. This validation is reflected in the survey responses regardless of race and gender and from those who are both inside and outside the greater Columbus community.

Poetic Responses

Another means of understanding Aminah Robinson’s work is by examining poetry written in response to the exhibition. Both art and poetry are vehicles for emotive expression (Nadaner, 1993). Poetry is an effective way for viewers to make connections with art by articulating its emotional impact in written and spoken form. The poems included here were written by poets involved in education programs at the Columbus Museum of Art and the Tacoma Art Museum and by the students in the DepARTures program at the Columbus Museum of Art. DepARTures is a yearlong, interdisciplinary program in which fifth graders from Columbus Public schools learn to write poetry inspired by art.

The following poem was written in response to Aminah’s pen and ink drawing on linen, *The Line, Buckeye Federal Bank* (see Figure 12), 1971.
First Song: Buckeye Federal

And raganon
And raganon
And raganon
And raganon
And raganon
blackberry patch
penetrate what you see
with the red mauve button
from the hawg a mawg tree
And raganon
And raganon
And raganon
And raganon
And raganon

There is a distance
There is a distance

within this village
there is a distance
there is a point

Poindexter Village
Poindexter Village

Hawg a mawg
Dialogue
People of the Page

I see the music in
the distance
lining up in a rage
of the

Buckeye Federal
Slavery Wage
And raganon
In *First Song: Buckeye Federal*, Tacoma poet and educator Lucas Smiraldo parallels the rhythm of Aminah’s long and undulating cloth RagGonNons by repeating the chorus of “And ragonon.” “Lining up in a rage” in front of the Buckeye Federal Bank refers to Aminah’s depiction of welfare recipients waiting to cash their checks. The line of people that snakes on and on in the painting is also suggested by the rhythmic form of Smiraldo’s poem. In work like *The Line*, Aminah comments on the welfare system and compares it to slavery. The reference to “slavery wage” in the poem is jolting and captures the serious subject that is evident in visual terms in Aminah’s picture. Smiraldo had never been to Columbus and was not familiar with the specific streets and landmarks to which Aminah refers in her work. But his poetry reflects an understanding of the underlying ideas these details represent and demonstrates the universality viewers identify in the particularity of Aminah’s work.

Both adults and children were inspired to write about Aminah’s work when they
visited *Symphonic Poem* while participating in the DepARTures program at the museum.

Below are poems written by the program’s poet/educators and also some of the fifth grade students in response to Aminah’s chair, *Gift of Love* (see Figure 13).

Washed with shine  
Glass hiding in wooden pockets

Stories born like babies  
out of a grandmother’s womb

We are the keepers  
of Hand-carved history

Etched in our memory  
Sewn to our soul

Dionne Brooks, 2003  
Poet/Educator

*Aminah’s Chair*
My chair is my wild  
Throne—and it is only here  
I come to hear the music,  
The whispering unworded songs  
Of those who dance above me.  
Could it ride  
on the waves?  
It is unsquare, my chair.  
The center of slump,  
The rose of repose—  
The trellis and ladder  
Of the stretched,  
Leaping, knotted,  
Laughing, wrinkled people  
That are me. Raise  
Your hand,  
If you want to  
Unbutton your eyes  
There may be an answer  
In your clothespin arm.

Terry Hermsen, 2003  
Poet/Educator
A Gift of Love
Come along with me to Africa
Come along with me and hear the music,
Come along, look, feel, hear, taste, see
The atmosphere
As I look at the faces and I hear the music
In the chair I feel gifted and loved.

5th grader, DepARTures program

Untitled
When I look at this chair
I see me as an African Queen
With all my people beside me
We cherish each other like family
We are some of the people
Who are a part of your
African history from today.

5th Grader, DepARTures program

The writers of these poems have all imagined what it would be like to sit in Aminah’s chair. The fifth graders communicated a sense of being surrounded by a community of people and loved, cherished, and secure. Another fifth grader wrote that “Sitting in the chair would be like sitting in a bunch of memories.” In the two poems by fifth graders, each of the students connected the chair with Africa and Africa with their own lives. For poet and educator Dionne Brooks, the chair suggests that each of us carves our own history through memory and these memories become part of who we are “sewn to our soul.” Both poet Terry Hermsen and one of the fifth grade writers note the importance of hearing the music in the chair. For Hermsen, “the stretched, leaping, knotted, laughing, wrinkled people” represent him, his ancestors, and family and the implication is that these hogmawg figures are all of us.
In responding to *Symphonic Poem* when it was in Tacoma, Jose S. Guiterrez, Jr. wrote about the scenes in *Dad’s Journey* (see Figure 6) in which Aminah depicted the horrors of the Middle Passage:

You have illuminated the voices of the voiceless  
The millions who have moaned, screamed and died—desperate for freedom  
In the wondrous waters of the innocent Atlantic  
Waves crashing dreams of freedom against the coastlines of Africa  
To the shores of the Americas.

And about Amianh’s depiction of the slave prison on Goree Island:

Aminah, you illuminate us as you have been illuminated by the lost souls of Goree Island, lost in the path of the hurricanes that wildly escorted us from South and Central American winds to the warm waters of the Caribbean and wilderness of North America….  
You have saved many souls that have been bound by the inhumanity of this world. You have saved many souls by telling the untold tales of those whose tongues were removed, hands chopped off, ears taken as tokens of triumph…. Remembering the triumphs and trials of those who lived and suffered for days, months, years and decades for the sole purpose of witnessing the evolution of freedom in the eyes of their children, grandchildren, and us.

This same writer explains that Aminah’s work gives “exposure to that which was nonchalantly passed by as if it had not existed.”

Another young poet succeeded in capturing the message about the future that Aminah is concerned with communicating:

The man with the diamond eyes  
sat next to me  
He whispered in my ear,  
“Come with me  
into the future.  
Don’t worry about the past  
or the present.  
Come with me!  
Come with me!  
Don’t be afraid.”

5th Grader, DepARTures program
These poetic responses are the result of thoughtful scrutiny of Aminah’s art. Like her paintings and sculpture, the poems contain big ideas. Art education scholar Dan Nadaner (1993) points out that art and poetry are similar because they often contain complex ideas but the format of each is complete and whole in itself. These poems by both adults and children attest to the multiple layers of meaning and the emotive spirit Aminah’s work conveys to those who experience it.

Both the response to the visitor survey and the poetry indicate that the curatorial goals of the exhibition had been achieved. A diverse group of visitors were able to connect the art with their own memories, experiences, and hopes.
CHAPTER 5
MUSEUM EDUCATORS AND EXHIBITIONS

Exhibitions are the largest and most visible education program that museums offer. This chapter builds the rationale for educator’s roles in exhibitions based on the success of visitors’ experiences in Symphonic Poem and detailed in the previous chapter. I examine the changing roles of educators and curators in the visitor- and community-centered museum and the challenges that arise when new voices and a range of views regarding objects are encouraged. I present the Denver Art Museum as an example of institutional change that reflects the shift from object-centeredness to visitor-centeredness and consider other possible models for maximizing the visitor experience. I also discuss the institution-wide environment that is necessary to enable museum workers to successfully serve their visitors and their communities. I conclude with the results of the survey I conducted with directors of education departments at art museums across the country. In the survey, I examine the involvement of educators in exhibitions, their views on their roles in exhibitions, and their opinions on how they are positioned in their museum’s organization and compensation structure.

Exhibitions = Education

Museum education programs, no matter how effective, serve only a small percentage of visitors. The largest percentage of museum attendance is driven by temporary exhibitions (Madden, J. C., 1992). If museum educators are to use their expertise to maximize the learning environment for all visitors, they must be involved in
presenting exhibitions. Patterson Williams (1992), Dean of Education and Master Teacher in Asian Art at the Denver Art Museum, recommends that educators with their knowledge of audiences and expertise in learning theory should be involved in the early stages of exhibition planning in order to develop educational, communication, and interpretive strategies. In order to do this effectively, educators must have a deep understanding of both their museum’s audiences and their museum’s collections and exhibitions. Williams calls for rigorous standards for museum educators that include a demonstrated knowledge of developmental psychology, philosophy of education, education theory, and teaching especially related to the kind of voluntary and personal learning that takes place in museums. Equally important is a solid grounding in the history, theory, or practice of a field of study relevant to the areas in which the museum collects (1992, p. 64). For educators to be effective in organizing and presenting exhibitions, they must have training and experience in all of these areas and the organizational structure of their museum must support this effort. In order to be fully engaged in exhibition development, educators need access to the records, images, and the objects themselves. While educators who have a specific programmatic focus may not have the credentials that reflect these demanding requirements, those who want to take leadership roles in effecting educational goals of exhibitions, must have these skills.

Danielle Rice (2003), veteran museum educator and currently the executive director of the Delaware Art Museum, points out that historically the status of museum educators was below that of curators. Curators often criticized educators for attempting to simplify explanations about art and exhibitions for general audiences. In most museums, education is now seen as an institution-wide, visitor-centered priority that has impacted
the job descriptions of museum workers (Falk & Dierking, 2000; Hein, 1998; Roberts, 1997; Weil, 2002). Educators are still responsible for programs that bring K-12 busloads of students to the museum but they are also a primary force for developing exciting and innovative programs that insure the museum’s relevancy and value to the community. In order for educators to do this, the organizational structure of museums must support their efforts. Departmental boundaries that separate museum workers must be dismantled and the traditional hierarchies that place curators above educators and other museum workers must be eliminated (Brigham, 1992). In my experience as a museum educator, I have observed a shift in the role of curators that parallels the museum’s shift in mission from object-centeredness to visitor- and community-centeredness. Many curators have increased their efforts to connect people with art in meaningful ways by making themselves more accessible to the public they serve, by working hand in hand with educators to develop all types of activities and materials to enhance the visitor experience of a particular exhibition, and to build relationships with a broad range of community groups and individuals. For general museum operations, the transformation has relaxed some of the boundaries that have existed within the museum’s organizational structure. As a museum educator, I have been involved in creating exhibitions, a role traditionally held exclusively by curators. For their part, curators have become actively involved in linking audiences with exhibitions and objects, a role previously the responsibility of educators.

In surveying museum educators across the country, I found that a majority of them indicate that they are not involved in exhibition planning early enough to maximize their effectiveness. The example of serving as co-curator or co-team leader of an
exhibition as I have done is not routine for museum educators. My title of exhibition curator for the Aminah Robinson retrospective provided the access that I needed to collaborate with exhibition designers, registrars, and print designers in a working environment that typically separates these functions. In museums that successfully create a value system without traditional hierarchical and departmental divisions such as the Denver model I describe below, museum workers such as curators and educators who are involved in exhibitions would be perceived as equals and have commensurate responsibilities. In these restructured museums, the need to give the title of “curator” to an educator would be irrelevant and the issue of educator as outsider would be eliminated.

Changing Roles of Educators and Curators

The standard definition of a curator as a custodian or “one who has the care and superintendence of something” (Merriam-Webster Online, 2004) is only a partial definition in the current museum landscape. No longer sequestered in the bowels of the museum to care for objects and research and write about them, curators are called upon to “court” donors and collectors, present public lectures and gallery talks, forge partnerships between the museum and community groups, and do research and writing in their areas of expertise. In becoming more audience- and community- centered, the concerns of curators have become more aligned with those of educators. In the past, museum educators found themselves undervalued and underpaid in the museum’s operational structure (Rice, 2003). As the survey I conducted and that of the American Association of Museums (AMA) indicate and that I discuss later in this chapter, museums are still in the process of reversing this trend. Philosophically, educators found themselves at odds with
many curators, who under the influence of modernism, preferred displaying art in stark, white galleries with as little didactic information as possible. When educators tried to respond to the demands of the public for biographical information about the artists and contextual information about the art in exhibitions, they were often pitted against curators who did not want to encroach on the viewer’s aesthetic experience with what the curators considered to be extraneous and distracting clutter.

During the period of political and social unrest in this country in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the shift in focus at museums from object to visitor began. Reports from the American Association of Museums on the role of education in museums were among factors contributing to a redefinition of museum education in general and the perception of the museum visitor in particular. The findings in *Museums for a New Century* (1984) indicated that museums should consider their educational role a priority. A few years later, *Excellence and Equity: Education and the Public Dimensions of Museums* (1992), strongly urged museums to make education the focus of their missions, to include multiple points of view from within and outside the museum, and to reflect community diversity in staffing, collections, and exhibitions. These documents with progressively stronger statements about the role of education were attributed to the growing influence of museum educators. New research that focused on the museum experience of visitors was undertaken and new models of how to insure that these experiences would be meaningful emerged.

Before the mid 1960s, in what has been labeled by one historian as a period of inertia for museums (Noriega, 1999), curators often operated autonomously in selecting the topic of an exhibition and sometimes spending years researching the subject. Curators
controlled the message of the exhibition through the selection of objects and text that
accompanied them. A curator worked with a designer to install the exhibition in a manner
that supported the curatorial theme and worked with educators to develop programs that
became another forum for the curator’s view. In some cases, the exhibition and its
presentation were of greater interest to the curator’s colleagues then to the public.

Hooper-Greenhill (1999) in *The Educational Role of the Museum* includes examples of
several communications models traditionally used in museums in which curators, who
determined the content and message of the exhibition, “pour” their information into the
waiting and empty “vessels” that are the viewers. In this top-down authoritative
approach, the curator is the information generator, the designer is the packager of the
information, and the educator works to disseminate the message. Museum workers, other
than the curator, enter the process far too late to have any significant input. This model
ignores the background, prior knowledge, and experience of the museum-going audience.

By the 1980s, a team approach to exhibition planning had emerged as an
alternative model to curator controlled exhibitions. In this collaborative or team model,
the curators share the responsibilities of developing and presenting exhibitions with other
skilled museum workers (Hooper-Greenhill, 1999). From the perspective of museum
educators who responded to my survey, the effectiveness of the team approach fluctuates
depending on the structure in place at any given museum, the amount of human and
financial resources allocated to each exhibition, and the personalities of particular
curators.

The composition of an exhibition team varies from museum to museum but
usually includes a curator, educator, designer, and representatives from development and
marketing. The range of how teams operate is infinite. In some museums, the exhibition team is not really a team at all but support staff for the curator. At the other end of the spectrum, educators share responsibilities with curators in the development of the exhibition, its content, theme and sub-themes, and educational strategies. In this model, the team is part of the decision-making from the earliest formative stages of the exhibition when the rationale for the exhibition and the checklist of objects are being finalized. Together, curators and educators develop videos, computer stations, reading areas, hands-on activities, and opportunities for visitors to reflect and share their thoughts in exhibition journals and, more recently, in podcasts and cellular phone tours.

Additional Voices, Expanded Views

Involving scholars and community members outside the museum itself in developing exhibitions enables museums to increase the range of their limited curatorial expertise. In a pluralistic society, museums need to listen to and reflect on the diverse opinions of others (Boyd, 1999). These tactics demand a lot of time and planning and the expectation that the views of those who participate in the process will be considered.

“Building a sustained audience,” concludes veteran museum educator Kathleen McLean (1988) “means building participation in decision-making and meaning-making, activities that must take place in many ways over an extended period of time” (p.103). When exhibition creators decide to include certain objects and to present them as part of a story they believe is valid, they inevitably omit other objects and stories. The responsibility of the exhibition creators is to acknowledge the existence of other opinions and other stories. In addition to presenting a particular curatorial point of view, exhibition makers should also provide a safe place for dialogue and respectful disagreement.
Museum educator McLean (1988) presents a number of examples of innovative exhibitions that have been organized by non-curators to interrogate and trouble the very existence of art, exhibitions, and museums. In *Mining the Museum* at the Maryland Historical Society, artist Fred Wilson developed a thought-provoking exhibition by creating jarring juxtapositions of objects. For example, in pairing a set of ornate silver candlesticks with a set of slave’s shackles, he called attention to the fact that they were both made from metal at about the same time but for very different reasons. Historian Susan Vogel organized *Art/artifact* at the Center for African Art in New York City in 1988 to demonstrate how Western museums give identities to objects depending on the museum’s disciplinary approach. For example, in the natural history museum, an object is one of many used to create an environment in a diorama and in an art museum, a similar object is displayed on a pedestal as a work of art. This type of exhibition reminds us that presentations of non-Western objects represent Western, not African or Native American, ideas about the objects. *Mining the Museum, Art/artifact*, and similar exhibitions examine art as an instrument of power that needs to be constantly questioned by those both inside and outside the museum.

In 1996 the director of the Columbus Museum of Art invited prominent members of the community to curate their own gallery exhibitions. The guest curators, including the director emeritus of the zoo, the director of the Urban League, and the head of a local private girls’ school, selected objects from the galleries and from storage that reflected their interests and tastes. These exhibitions featured many familiar objects in new juxtapositions and other objects that had not been out of storage in years. These
community-based exhibitions, which proved to be very popular, were not particularly critical, but they demonstrated the legitimacy of involving a broad and diverse range of voices in the presentation of exhibitions.

Not everyone agrees with this democratization of museum collections and exhibitions. Hilda Hein (2000) believes that a conceptual revolution is taking place in museums in which “…the shift away from object centeredness to an emphasis on the promotion of experiences reveals new ethical, epistemological, and aesthetic horizons whose discovery may shake the museum’s foundations.” (p. ix) Hein fears that this revolution will homogenize museums and cause them to sacrifice the specificity of the objects they hold. The optimal course for museums to take is one that incorporates public service, social responsibility, and economic viability (e.g., Falk & Dierking, 2000; Hooper-Greenhill, 1999; Skramstad, 1999; Weil, 2002) without sacrificing serious scholarship and subject expertise. However, serious scholarship should include the discussion of alternative perspectives when these are relevant. Opening the curatorial purview to the voice of museum educators and others in the community encourages the type of “troubling” and interrogating of exhibited objects that a solitary expert opinion tends to silence. In the best case scenario, educators who have some art historical grounding in specific areas and curators who understand how people learn in museum settings, work together and provide the fertile ground for visitors to make their own meaningful connections with art.

Denver Art Museum Model

The Denver Art Museum (2004) presents an exemplary model in which educators and curators work as partners in every aspect of museum education including the
installation of both temporary exhibitions and permanent collections. The organization of staff presents an innovative paradigm that avoids the barriers that are often the result of departmentally structured museums. Educators function as master teachers, programmers, and support staff in areas of the museum’s collection strengths such as European and American, Native American, and Asian. This represents a radical departure from the organization of education departments in most museums in which educators are assigned to audience-based programmatic areas of responsibility such as adult, school, or family.

In a museum-wide project to enhance visitors’ experiences that began in the late 1980s, a master educator led an interpretive team in the re-installation of Denver’s European and American collections. Her team included a curator of American art, a curator of European art, an exhibition designer, a graphic designer, and a writer. In a report of the project on their web site (Denver Art Museum, 2004) one of the curators observed, “We didn’t really worry about departments. We just erased all those boundaries and worked together. No decision was made without team work.” Extensive research involving numerous visitor panels revealed three main audience categories: novices, families, and more sophisticated visitors. The interpretation team then began developing strategies for best serving these groups. Through focus groups and surveys, the team determined that visitors preferred thematic installations such as landscapes and the human figure rather than a chronological or stylistic installation. By grouping objects thematically instead of chronologically, surprising and intriguing juxtapositions occurred between objects from different times and places. Another conclusion of the staff’s research was visitors’ interest in human nature stories about the artists. All exhibition text and labels were written to reflect this human connection. By routinely experimenting with innovative
ideas for labels, gallery guides, and gallery activities and testing them on visitor panels, the Denver staff was able to determine the effectiveness of these materials before they were incorporated in an exhibition (Roberts, 1997). Hands-on activities encouraged visitors to express their own opinions and develop their own interpretations about works of art. Other strategies included a discovery library within the exhibitions and random-access audio guides with artist and curator comments, music, and mini tours that explored specific themes.

One of the keys to Denver’s team model is that educators have expertise in specific subject areas in addition to their focus on museum learning. This expertise enables educators to share the responsibility for exhibitions with curators. In order to insure that visitors have optimal exhibition experiences, curators also have to expand their areas of expertise and make the extra effort to consider visitors and how they learn. While educators and curators maintain their separate areas of expertise, they must know enough about each others’ concerns to work together effectively.

With strong leadership from its educators, the Denver Art Museum shifted its model from one based on curatorial authority to one that encouraged visitors to construct their own meanings. This philosophy of interpretation became the guiding principle for the entire museum including the installation of both permanent and temporary exhibitions. This team model works well in large museums with specialists trained in visitor studies, evaluation, print design and technology, but is more difficult in small and medium size museums with limited human resources.

In museums that are smaller than Denver and have fewer staff resources, the full and early participation of educators in developing exhibitions can insure a more open
approach that encourages visitors to construct their own meaning through elements of the exhibition such as selection of objects, and the related text panels, labels, audio tours, and programs. When educators are involved in determining the thematic contents of an exhibition, they have a knowledge base that helps them forge community connections and develop meaningful materials and programs for the public. In theory, this type of outcome is the goal of the team concept of exhibition planning. In many instances, however, by the time an exhibition team meets, the concepts and themes of the exhibition are established and the programs and exhibition materials must fit into the established framework. When educators are involved in the formative stages of exhibition planning, they have the opportunity to design meaningful programs and exhibition materials that allow visitors to confront related issues and expand conversations.

It is my conclusion that in order for a curator/educator collaboration to work well, the curator must believe in the centrality of the visitor’s experience and, in addition, be committed to share the curatorial responsibilities with others. In order for the educator to serve as an exhibition partner, he or she must have an adequate art history background, writing skills, and the desire and time to undertake such a project. Museum workers should have training and experience in communicating issues of voice, authenticity, and context in the presentation of exhibitions. Graduate programs in museum education and museum studies should address these needs. From an institutional viewpoint, education departments have to be structured to allow an educator to take the necessary time to work on an exhibition. With the current levels of staffing in many education departments, museum educators with the appropriate skills simply do not have the time to devote to
serving as exhibition coordinators. However, the potential of this model to better serve the public makes the institutional change that it would require seem a worthwhile effort.

When educators are involved in determining the conceptual basis of exhibitions, they have the ability to anticipate community connections and make sure they come to fruition in a thoughtful and timely manner. In a *Journal of Museum Education* article provocatively entitled, “Are Museum Educators Still Necessary?”, museum consultants Munley and Roberts (2006) point out that in a visitor-centered environment, all museum workers are sharing the responsibilities of connecting people with art, a role traditionally held by educators. They note that this paradigm shift from the object-centered museum challenges educators to step forward and forge community alliances and partnerships that situate the museum as a center for civic participation and dialogue. They call for museums to go beyond being visitor-centered to being community-centered institutions. A particular challenge for art museums is to make collections and exhibitions relevant and valued by a broad-based public. Working together, educators and curators have the ability to organize exhibitions that appeal to the eye and, when appropriate, also relate to issues of community importance. The work of Aminah Robinson, for example, is an aesthetic feast of color and design but the work also presents the opportunity to encourage public dialogue dealing with civil rights, women’s rights, prejudice, and poverty.

Maximizing the Visitor Experience

In addition to the specific exhibition practices I have discussed, many aspects of museum operations have to be aligned in order to create an environment that maximizes the visitor experience and best serves the community. For example, the museum’s
director and board of trustees must embrace the concept of visitor- and community-centeredness and work to establish the financial and human resources required to implement it. In order to be community-centered, museum staff needs time to attend meetings and programs of community organizations. In most cases, this means hiring additional staff to form community advisory groups and work with them.

Museum designer James M. Bradburne notes that visitors “are not only intelligent, but they derive real pleasure from confronting material that makes them think about the world in which they live” (p. 5). This type of pleasure derives from the connections they make with their own experiences and from the new insights they gain about the lives of others. Within this framework, educators and curators can develop and present exhibitions guided by the understanding that every visitor will have a unique encounter with each object they observe and in every exhibition they enter. Programs, exhibitions, and educational materials should encourage visitors with a variety of different learning styles to form and express their personal responses. By providing several different perspectives on the same work of art or indicating that the meaning of a particular painting is contested, viewers are invited to agree or disagree and to formulate their own responses. Exhibitions should reveal rather than conceal the presence of conflicting views (Boyd, 1999; Hein, H., 2000). Both educators and curators should be involved routinely in evaluating programs and exhibitions. The need for museum professionals to document their work and to ask serious and systematic questions about what they are doing should be viewed as an integral part of any museum education.
program or exhibition. In-depth interviews with visitors who have attended an exhibition or program result in the rich qualitative information that can be used in planning future projects (Hein, G., 1995).

The use of questions in exhibition texts and label copy is another technique that encourages viewers to become active participants in linking what they already know to what they are seeing. David Carr (2003) describes “the educative museum” as one that:

will harbor alternative ways to think about the world, and offer many opportunities to reorganize experience, find a new angle, and when needed, begin again. If museums are to assist their users to explore and to develop what they know, they must invite the avalanche of questions and create the webwork of connections that configure a learning life” (p. 34).

A diversity of scholars, artists, collectors, and community leaders can be asked to participate in developing exhibitions and even in serving as curators. In addition to bringing multiple voices to exhibitions, this community-based process expands the areas of expertise covered by the museum’s limited staff. Similarly, collaborations with all kinds of community organizations bring fresh perspectives to museums and their programs. Some of these collaborations are obvious such as involving ethnic or religious groups in exhibitions of particular interest to them. Others are less obvious but often result in new synergies. For example, since 2003, the Columbus Museum of Art and The Institute for Collaborative Research and Public Humanities at The Ohio State University (OSU) have partnered in a lecture program entitled “The Big Picture.” Scholars from a variety of disciplines at OSU and other area universities provide context for museum exhibitions beyond the scope of the exhibition itself. For example, in conjunction with an exhibition of Jacob Lawrence’s Migration Series, an English professor explored poetry that related to the same subject. “Art and Arias,” a collaboration with the local opera
company, literally brings new voices to the galleries. Singers perform excerpts from
upcoming operas in front of art that is related in some way. Scholars and educators
present brief commentaries on both the art and the music. Both “The Big Picture” and
“Art and Arias” bring new voices to interpret the art and also new audiences of university
faculty and opera enthusiasts.

Another strategy for actively engaging visitors in problem solving and critical
testing is through interactive strategies that include placing audio guides, computer
stations, music, and resource areas in or near exhibitions. Harvard psychologist Howard
Gardner (1985) suggests each of us has a set of preferred learning styles that correspond
to categories such as linguistic, musical, logical-mathematical, spatial, bodily-kinesthetic,
interpersonal, and intrapersonal. The use of a variety of techniques that utilizes all the
senses to engage museum visitors accommodates some of these different learning styles
(Gurian, 1991). Interactive opportunities related to museum collections and exhibitions
can be designed to encourage problem solving and imaginative thinking. Web sites are
another interactive means of connecting the public with museums. Most museums have
sites that provide information about general operations, programs, and exhibitions. Many
of these have educational sections that include virtual gallery tours, in-depth discussions
about artists or exhibitions, lesson plans for teachers, and interactive games. Museum
Web sites have emerged as a well-respected source for art historical information and they
also can be designed to encourage public dialogue and spark creativity through online art-
making and writing activities. Museums understand the educational potential that Web
sites offer but many of them do not have the financial and human resources to invest in creating and maintaining the sites they envision. This new technology requires a shift in priorities to meet this need.

In a visitor and community-centered museum, the educational goal is to encourage visitors to have positive experiences that range from those that are memorable to those that are transformative. Exhibitions represent the heart and soul of museums but they must compete with a world of leisure-time entertainment and sporting events. Traditional museums will continue to appeal to a small percentage of the population, but museums that fail to engage in change run the risk of becoming irrelevant to the vast majority of their communities. The dilemma for those in the museum field is to find the correct balance between authority and freedom (Skramstad, 1999) and stability and change. The shift to a visitor and community-centered museum will continue to affect the roles of curators and educators. “Strangely enough,” observes Rice (2003), “since the early 1990s, the increased art-historical emphasis on context, combined with new information about visitor learning preferences and styles, has led curators and educators to subtly reverse their traditional roles.” Today curators, like educators, are interested in creating an exhibition environment in which the visitor’s experience is maximized. Curators and educators work together to provide rich contextual information about their museum’s art in both traditional and innovative forms. In the visitor- and community-centered landscape, the goals of educators and curators have merged. However, the working relationship of curators and educators is still dependent on the organizational structure of a particular museum, its resources, and the personalities and working styles of the individuals.
In many cases, curators and educators have gotten well beyond the temple versus forum debate and are able to agree on the centrality of the visitor experience and the importance of relating exhibitions and collections to the community. In welcoming voices from both inside and outside the museum to join the traditional authoritarian voice of the curator, the museum can be both temple and forum— a place of wonder and resonance— for a growing and diverse audience.

Survey of Educators

In the spring of 2003, I sent surveys (see Appendix C) to the heads of education departments at a sampling of 100 American art museums. I received 65 completed surveys. Of the 65, the size of museums based on number of annual visitors ranged from 30,000 to 1.5 million. My purpose in conducting the survey was to get a sense of the involvement of educators in exhibition selection, development, and presentation and to determine how the educators viewed their own particular roles in exhibitions. As a director of education, I often questioned the prioritization of my many responsibilities and the overall effectiveness of the museum’s education program. I was interested to know whether or not other museum educators had similar issues and whether or not they, too, believed that their museum’s education program would be more effective if their education departments had a deeper and earlier involvement in exhibitions.

The respondents to the survey average more than 16 ½ years as museum educators and more than 10 years at their current institutions. More than five out of every six are women. Sixty percent of them have undergraduate degrees in art history, 11% have undergrad degrees in studio art, and the rest had a variety of majors including literature, art education, humanities, public administration business, classics, and
archeology. Those with advanced studies have degrees or have taken courses in art
history, museum studies, art education, history, American studies, English, and public
administration.

*Educator Involvement in Exhibitions*

In an effort to determine the involvement of educators in organizing and
presenting exhibitions, I asked them about the process of selecting, scheduling, and
presenting exhibitions in their museums (see Table 5.1). Fifty percent of the respondents
indicated that their museum’s exhibitions were selected by a team including educators.
The other half indicated that exhibitions were selected by the director or the curator or a
combination of director, curator and board committee and educators had no involvement
in the selection process. Of the total responding educators, all were involved in some
aspects of exhibition presentation. Educators indicated involvement in aspects related to
exhibitions such as developing programs, scheduling tours, training docents, and
producing school materials.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Exhibition components</th>
<th>% Respondents involved in developing components</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Developing exhibition content</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scheduling of exhibitions</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selecting exhibition as part of a team</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developing some aspect of exhibition information</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(text panels, extended labels, audio guides, etc)</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scheduling tours</td>
<td>98%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developing programming after the exhibition has been selected</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Producing materials for schools</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training docents</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5.1
Educator involvement in exhibitions
When I asked respondents about their involvement in developing specific types of exhibition materials, I found that all of them produced family guides (see Table 5.2). Many were involved in developing other aspects of exhibition education such as a study areas, audio guides, videos, and printed guides. In my own experience, changing technology has impacted the role of all museum workers and it has significant implications for exhibition design and education. At the time I conducted the survey, most museums used audio tours that were recorded and remained fixed throughout the period of their use. The voices on the recording were limited to expert commentary of a few individuals such as museum staff, scholars, artists, or critics. Today at museums such as the Columbus Museum of Art, educators have been able to involve experts and also visitors and groups of students through the use of podcasts, cellular phone, and MP3 technology. These technologies make the art-centered conversations more lively, closer to conversations in real time, and more inclusive of a broad range of voices.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Exhibition components</th>
<th>% Educators involved</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Family guides</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study area</td>
<td>83%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audio guides</td>
<td>77%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Videos</td>
<td>72%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Printed guides</td>
<td>72%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Text panels</td>
<td>63%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extended labels</td>
<td>57%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5.2

Educator involvement in producing exhibition materials
When I asked the education directors if they felt they had the right level of involvement in exhibitions, 47% of those who responded indicated that they would like educators to have a higher level of involvement in exhibitions in their institutions. One educator remarked that his or her director had extensive control over curators and exhibitions. Another noted that there was no collaboration at all and that education was involved by default when there is no curator. Six respondents mentioned that they would like to participate earlier in the process of planning exhibitions. Two respondents indicated the desire to participate in setting goals for exhibitions and another noted that education and audience should be considered before the exhibition is selected. Another expressed the opinion that the exhibition would be more educationally effective if the educator helped to determine the exhibition story. Someone else remarked that the particular dates and time of year of an exhibition are very important for attendance and programs but educator opinion is seldom taken into account. Two educators noted that the involvement of educators is dependent on the personality of the particular curator. One respondent indicated that the curator, who has “final say” is more concerned with visual representation than the effectiveness of education components. One respondent noted that the lack of time prevents him or her from becoming more involved. Several noted that visitors would benefit if educators were involved in planning the exhibition and especially in label and information design.

Forty-six percent of the respondents replied that they believed they had the right level of involvement. One educator noted that educators and curators work together and that she was surprised that I had asked the question. However, of those who responded that they felt they were involved in exhibitions at an appropriate level, many were not
completely satisfied with the status quo. One respondent indicated a desire for more involvement in all aspects of exhibition planning so that the museum’s vision could expand beyond that of the curator and director. Another mentioned that funding organizations want to see more input from educators. Several desired an improved team approach that did not rely on the personality of a particular curator for implementation. Another observed that he or she would like to have more involvement but is prohibited by time.

Six percent of the educators answered both and yes and no to being satisfied with their involvement in exhibitions. Their responses were similar to those above. They indicated frustration with not having enough time to devote to the exhibition process and the lack of an institutionalized team approach to ensure their involvement. The comments from those who answered yes, no, and yes/no when I asked them about their level of involvement in exhibitions, were surprisingly similar. Respondents in each category noted that lack of time, curator personality, and unstructured team formats were obstacles to maximizing their involvement in exhibitions.

Although 87% of the educators reported being at the same level as curators in regard to their institutions’ organizational charts, 64% either knew or believed they earned less than their curatorial colleagues (see Table 5.3). This information parallels the 2003 American Association of Museums (AAM) salary survey. The mean salary at the time for the director of education was $58,120. In the survey, this person is described as the one who supervises several education departments or programs, is responsible for the development of the general education program, has some administrative responsibilities, considerable public contact, and supervises professionals and volunteers. The mean
salary of the chief curator was $79,501. His or her responsibilities were described as general administrative responsibilities for curatorial affairs, plus some administrative functions, considerable public and donor contact, and supervision of staff. In the AAM overview of museum organization, both the position of director of education and the chief curator report to the museum’s director or deputy director. The survey I conducted and that of the AAM indicate that museum budgets provide more money for the directors of curatorial departments than for the directors of education.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Organizational chart</th>
<th>Salary</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Same as curators</td>
<td>87%</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Below curators</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>64%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Above curators</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5.3
Educator perception of organizational chart and salary

*Findings*

The results of the survey reflect the active involvement of educators in exhibitions and their desire to be more involved in the earliest stages of the selection, development, and presentation of exhibitions. In many museums, educators would like to be more involved in the exhibition process from its inception but their institutions are not organized to encourage this outcome. With a few exceptions, the respondents believed they could be more effective if their museums implemented guidelines and procedures for exhibition teams. With expectations and responsibilities delineated, the involvement of
educators might be less likely to be affected by the personalities of individual curators. Traditional departmental boundaries and job descriptions remain and limit educators and other staff from being involved in the earliest stages of exhibition development when audience goals and education objectives are set. Many of the respondents noted that limitations of time and staff limit their ability to be more involved in exhibitions than they are at present.
CHAPTER 6

SUMMARY, IMPLICATIONS FOR MUSEUM EDUCATION, PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS, IDEAS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

The intersection of serving as a co-curator for *Symphonic Poem* and the research I have completed has provided me with the opportunity to consider theoretical, philosophical, and practical issues about visitor- and community-centered museums, the field of museum education, the role of educators in exhibitions, and my continuing work with Aminah Robinson and her art. In this chapter, I summarize my findings, consider implications for each of these areas, and suggest topics for further research.

Visitor-and Community-Centered Museums

Since the last decades of the 20th century, museums have experienced a paradigm shift from being object-centered to being visitor-centered (Hooper-Greenhill, 1995; Roberts, 1997; Falk and Dierking, 2000; Weil, 2002) and more recently community-centered (Munley & Roberts, 2006). This paradigm shift is a result of the questioning initiated both inside and outside the museum about the relevancy and value of museums. These questions are being raised by theorists and practitioners and by those who financially support museums: individuals, foundations, corporations, governments and taxpayers. Many of these voices call for museums to become centers of social enterprise (Weil, 2002), forums for civic dialogue (Korza & Bacon, 2005), and agencies for community response (Chew, 2005). Others warn that this type of change risks the fundamental identity and specificity of museums (H. Hein, 2000).
Another way to think about the future of museums is that they will include remnants of the modern museum and its examples of canonical art, but the emphasis shifts from the accumulation of objects to the use of the objects (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000). The exhibition of art will become one of many strategies for communication that also include community partnerships of all kinds. Unlike the modernist museum that was defined by a particular building, the post-museum will not be limited to a physical structure. Rather, it may result in satellite locations in commercial buildings, programs and workshops throughout a city, and increased use of technology as a means of communication.

The visitor- and community-centered museum presents many more challenges than the object-centered model because unlike objects, people and communities are constantly changing. Museums exist in a global environment that is also constantly changing and that bombards us with information, images, and an array of entertainment and technological gadgetry that competes for our leisure time and dollars. As museum professionals and those who care about museums, we continually examine our missions and objectives in an effort to remain relevant to the individuals and communities we serve. We search for innovative programs, materials, and exhibitions that connect people with art in order to maintain our audiences of regular museum-goers and to attract new ones. For example, we can “use” the art of Aminah Robinson that is grounded in storytelling to engage visitors in telling their own personal stories. We “use” her work to generate ideas, conversations, and forums for discussing issues of race, gender, and class that affect us all. In order to be relevant and valuable and further democratic ideals, we
employ tactics similar to those used by art educators in schools who call for social justice art education (Desai & Chalmers, 2007; Kumashiro, 2002); and social reconstruction art education (Ballengee-Morris & Stuhr, 2001; Hicks, 1994; Albers, 1995).

As museum staffs and boards attempt to be relevant to audiences and communities, we must listen to our visitors and potential visitors in order to connect them to us, be well informed about research in free choice learning, comfortable with advances in technology and, at the same time, be true to the collections that make each museum unique. We collect and exhibit objects but we do this to serve the public.

Educators and Exhibitions

The shift to visitor-centeredness can be seen in recent iterations of museum mission statements and in many innovative, interactive approaches that have become standard components of exhibitions. The results of the survey I conducted with education directors in art museums throughout the country and my own experience indicate that educators are instrumental in creating many of these exhibition components including study areas, text panels, brochures, family guides, extended labels, cell phone and MP3 audio tours. However, many of the educators indicated that they believe they could be more effective if they were involved in exhibition development earlier and if their involvement was not dependent on the attitude of a particular director or curator. Organizational structures at many museums have not kept up with the changes reflected in museum mission statements and in pledges to connect people with art in meaningful ways. While most of the educators I surveyed welcome the increased responsibility of innovative educational components for exhibitions, many of them noted that they do not have adequate time or staff to support their involvement in these efforts. Except for the
few art museums that have restructured and dismantled the traditional departmental barriers that separate educators from the early phases of exhibition planning, museums are not organized to encourage the voice of educators in exhibitions. Educators who believe as I do that exhibitions are central to delivering education in museums often find overwhelming challenges to implementing their ideas. In addition to the responsibilities enumerated in an educator’s job description, educators must be able to navigate the politics of slowly changing museum structures. Strong, innovative education programs go hand in hand with efforts to increase the relevancy of museums in the public arena. Restructuring museums so that educators are full partners in developing exhibitions would eliminate many of the obstacles that educators report keep them from using their expertise to help maximize the visitor experience.

Every object that is displayed in a museum’s collections and temporary exhibitions represents decisions that are inclusive and exclusive. By their very nature of collecting and exhibiting, museums demonstrate their authority and power. Museums cannot exist without doing so. However, visitors to museums have a right to understand the limitations of museum display and the fact that other opinions exist. By inviting a variety of voices from inside and outside the museum to be involved in exhibition planning and presentation, the public can better understand the complexities of displaying objects. Educators who have been trained in learning theory, are experienced in working with people and community organizations, and are knowledgeable in regard to their museum’s collections can and should have a strong voice in maximizing the visitor experience and forging community connections.
“Using” the Art of Aminah Robinson to Fight Oppression

In my ongoing work at the Columbus Museum of Art, I am in the preliminary stages of designing a study center, and in advance of the Center, a Web site, that will be devoted to the work of Aminah Robinson. The space will be designed to implement educational initiatives that encourage critical thinking, creativity, and social justice. My dissertation research has already and will continue to inform this project. The museum in general and the study center in particular can be places where visitors of all ages enter into respectful dialogue using the work of Aminah and related artists as a starting point. I see the possibility of the center becoming a site actively engaged in anti-oppressive education (Kumashiro 2002). The center should be a safe place for those whom Kumashiro defines as other: people of color, women, people who are economically disadvantaged, and those who are not heterosexual by asserting that an underlying museum value is to affirm differences and expose forms of oppression. Through exhibition presentation and related materials, activities and programs, we can counter “othering” and encourage visitors to “trouble” their perceptions about normalcy. For Audre Lorde (1995), fighting racism, sexism, and elitism should be a lifetime pursuit in which each one of us seeks:

to extract these distortions from our living at the same time as we recognize, reclaim, and define those differences upon which they are imposed. For we have all been raised in a society where those distortions were endemic within our living (p. 282).

Lorde believes that recognizing human difference can be “a springboard for creative
change in our lives.” The type of activism that Lorde and Kumashiro advocate present both challenging and enriching possibilities for social change in which Aminah’s work can play a significant role.

Feminism and critical race theory are two forms of critical discourse that deal with insider/outsider status as well as other binaries such as normal/different and dominant/other. Reflecting on, exploring, and questioning in light of these discourses has provided both a theoretical context for my research and new directions for practical applications in the field of museum education. These discourses have also made me more comfortable with the changing roles I play as insider/outsider. In working both within the museum and with Aminah Robinson, I am convinced that outside/insider issues are much less important than the focus of the work that is to be accomplished.

In Appendix A, I present examples of Aminah’s work with descriptions, discussion questions, and activities to encourage critical thinking and social activism. Although these exercises are intended for students, the material could also be included in label text or a gallery brochures accompanying the exhibition of these objects.

Community Interactions

The Aminah Robinson Study Center will provide a unique site for community interaction. The goal of the study center is to present provocative exhibitions and programs based on Aminah’s prolific and stunning array of work. Her art and archival material, which Aminah has generously agreed to share with the museum on an ongoing basis, will be available to the general public through exhibitions and interactive technology. Special programs will be tailored to students, teachers, scholars, collectors
and artists. This innovative presentation of material will encourage civic dialogue and intergenerational storytelling. One possibility is a recording studio in which visitors will be able to document family and community stories.

The RagGonNons are concerned with taking walks, process, and journeys rather than in arriving, finishing, and permanence. Museum and school educators can use the RagGonNons as a catalyst for dialogue with adult audiences and for projects that encourage students to research and document their own pasts and reflect on issues of oppression that concern them. Feminist scholar Michele Wallace (1999) notes “The object hasn’t been the primary thing in visual culture for some time, even in the most substantial and concrete artwork being done today….We look to art for its transient, ephemeral, and even transcendent qualities” (p. 180). Wallace’s requirement of art is that it “take us on a journey” (p. 180). Aminah’s emphasis is on the journey and not on an enduring, precious object. Her work embraces the goals artist and critic bell hooks (1995) seeks:

I want to create work that shares with an audience, particularly oppressed and marginalized groups, the sense of agency artistry offers, the empowerment. I want to share the aesthetic inheritance handed down to me by my grandmother and generations of black ancestors, whose ways of thinking about the issue have been globally shaped in the African diaspora and informed by the experience of exile and domination. I want to reiterate the message that “we must learn to see” (p. 84).

Seeing here is meant metaphysically as heightened awareness and understanding, the intensification of one’s capacity to experience reality through the realm of the senses (p. 84). Aminah’s art provides a sense of agency by making her community the subject of her life’s work. Her art presents a different view of what is “normal” and her storytelling indicates that there are many ways to experience the world and an infinite number of
ways to tell the story of those experiences. The visitor response to Aminah’s work, which I discuss in Chapter 4, supports this outcome. In many cases, both black and white visitors to the exhibition recalled similar childhood memories of neighborhoods, grandparents, and “making do.” Many respondents noted a new awareness and respect for the communities, events, and individuals Aminah depicts in her work. The poems and creative writing demonstrated the authors’ abilities to imagine themselves in similar situations regardless of their race, gender, or age.

While the Center will be of interest to the art appreciating public in general, we will make an effort to involve and empower low income families and collaborate with those educators and social service workers who work with this population. The Center will also focus on serving teachers and students. The study center will generate the development of additional programming streams that will expand our relationship with Columbus Public Schools and surrounding districts. In the past when Aminah’s work has been on view at the museum, teachers have developed outstanding curriculum that supports state academic standards in arts, social studies, and language arts. Through the Center’s programming, materials, and the Web site we are currently developing, we will have the capacity to reach many more students and teachers and provide the means for them to share ideas and arts-centered learning opportunities.

In order to involve the community, we will form an advisory group of school and university educators, community arts and civic leaders, and community-minded young professionals, who will help develop topics that will be explored in depth through programs and exhibitions. We envision using Aminah’s work to develop related programs on important yearlong themes. For example, we could focus on the gap
between low and middle income students and families that has so much to do with our
current education crisis. We could invite nationally known educators who have written on
this topic to spur dialogue and action plans that would insure that more low income
children and their families feel comfortable in using the museum as a resource. The Civil
Rights Movement, for example, would be another compelling topic for lectures, films and
symposia that would involve those from the Columbus area who were active in the
movement along with nationally known historians, writers and filmmakers. This
important history could come alive for those who are too young to remember it
themselves. In this way, Aminah’s work will serve as a bridge between the present and
the past.

A challenge to the success of both the study center and the Web site is reaching
those who are disenfranchised and marginalized and engaging them. In order to reach
audiences that are not regular museum-goers, it is necessary to form partnerships with
those in the community who already have relationships with these target audiences.
These include organizations such as the Urban League, the Anti-Defamation League, the
metropolitan library system, area schools, and religious and social service institutions,
that share the center’s goals of using art as a means of empowerment and dialogue. This
is hard work which involves making these new relationships a museum-wide priority. It
means having staff and financial resources to respond to community needs. For example,
we must be willing, in some cases, to move beyond the physical walls of the museum and
consider bringing our programs to these targeted audiences in their own neighborhoods.
Recommendations for Further Study

The survey I conducted with museum educators is now four years old. Based on my own experience, I believe museum educators are playing a more important role in exhibitions than ever before. In order to access the current state of educators’ roles in exhibitions, a similar survey or interviews could be conducted today. A worthwhile goal for subsequent research would be to expand the scope of my study to include surveys or interviews with curators and museum directors in order to understand their ideas about visitor- and community-centeredness and their perspectives in regard to the role of the educator in an exhibition. Have museums restructured to support efforts to better serve the public? Does the position and compensation of educators reflect their responsibilities? Educators do not operate in a vacuum. Another research topic that I think is timely is to examine higher education programs in museum education to determine whether or not those who want to enter the field are being prepared to work effectively in visitor- and community-centered institutions. Do they have the skills to be effective partners in developing exhibitions? What program of study would be most beneficial to a graduate student interested in developing exhibition education components? Another idea for further research would be to compare and contrast several different organizational models of art museums. What are their goals and how effective are they in reaching them?

Another important area of research related to my topic is related to museum visitors. While my visitor research focused on short term responses to *Symphonic Poem*, further research could determine other effects of the exhibition. Were any visitors motivated to research their own family or community histories as a result of their visits? Have any of them “passed on” stories to the children in their families? Have they been moved to
preserve the stories? If so, in what form? What are the visitor and staff responses to exhibitions in which innovative, interactive components have been developed? Do visitors feel connected to the art? Do these initiatives enrich the visitor experience?

Final Thoughts

Through this case study, I set out to examine the role of museum educators in exhibitions and to study the response of visitors to the work of Aminah Robinson in light of the paradigm shift from object centeredness to visitor and community centeredness in today’s museums. I hope that my work has “troubled” the relationship of museum educators and their roles in exhibitions. Based on my experience in developing Symphonic Poem, I believe that museum educators can play a primary role in developing exhibitions that are relevant to and valued by diverse audiences. In addition to planning school tours, training docents, developing family guides, and organizing programs, educators can be part of a team that maximizes the visitor experience of exhibitions. Museum educators, in tandem with those inside and outside the museum, can foster strategies that encourage the participation of many voices rather than those that uphold exclusionary values. By working to fill in the gaps that the modern museum created in regard to marginalizing and ignoring the voices of women and minorities, educators in the post-museum can become border crossers themselves and encourage visitors to do the same.

Since I began working with Aminah Robinson many years ago, I intuitively believed that her work had the potential to connect with viewers and add meaning and understanding to their lives. My research including the visitor surveys that I conducted and the many casual encounters I had with visitors in Symphonic Poem in Columbus and
in each of the cities to which it traveled has confirmed my intuition. Ironically, Aminah’s work is grounded in the details of her life as an African-American woman in a particular neighborhood of Columbus, Ohio, and yet men and women who were not African-American and who were not from the eastside of Columbus connected her work with their own lives on a profound level. Their observations and stories, in turn, have moved me. One of the great advantages of my research is that it has resulted in a meandering journey. Along the way, I have become absorbed in the thinking of black feminists, critical race theorists, critical education theorists, and museum theorists and practitioners. Aminah Brenda Lynn Robinson and her work have been the passport to this journey which has no end in sight.
APPENDIX A

Critical Strategies for Examining Work by Aminah Robinson

Gift of Love

Gift of Love (see Figure 13) is a throne-like chair Aminah Robinson carved from wood scraps and the gnarled root of a tree. The central focus of the chair is its leather seat into which the artist has carved a man, a woman, and a child. The leather carving functions in practical terms as a seat and also as the central theme of the work—the importance of family around which everything else revolves. The figures that populate the arms and back of the chair are made of hogmawg, human hair clippings, clothespins, sticks, fabric and other found objects. As a young child, Robinson’s mother and father had taught her to “make do” using natural and found objects for art materials. In addition, some of the materials are spiritually and historically significant. For example, the Georgia clay she uses symbolizes the experiences of her ancestors and those of many African Americans who were enslaved on the Sea Islands off the coast of South Carolina and Georgia prior to and during the Civil War. The hair clippings are form the barbershop of her friend and mentor, folk artist Elijah Pierce, and symbolize the spiritual nature of their relationship.

Questions to consider: What does community mean? What does the term “family” mean? Why does Africa play such an important role in Aminah Robinson’s work? What is the significance of the materials Robinson has used in this chair? Do artists have any
limitations in regard to the materials they use? What are they? Do financial concerns limit
who can be an artist? Why or why not? Why does Robinson include a figure on the arm
of this chair who is walking forward but looking back?

Possible actions: Have students create their own form of a chair after they consider what
with components that form their own communities. They should carefully select materials
to reflect their views. Have students discuss where the chair should be located and how
the theme of the chair can best relate to those who will view it. For example, how might
the chair reflect its placement in a hospital? A library? A courthouse?

Dad’s Journey

Robinson is concerned with remembering —with recovering her own past, that of
her ancestors, and the collective past of communities that no longer exist. “For
Robinson,” writes art historian Leslie King-Hammond (2002), “memory is about
biography and autobiography, history and genealogy, survival and triumph. Memory is
composed of many fragmented elements that are given symbols, meanings, and codes to
help us remember why they are important” (p. 48). Robinson’s goal is to recover
memories that were lost and combine them into a common history that will help
those who see her work better understand the past. Her work frequently deals with Africa
before slavery, the Middle Passage, slavery and freedom, and the migration North. These
events are intertwined with more recent, sometimes personal events. She said of Dad’s
Journey (see Figures 5 and 6), a memorial to her father:

It’s about the nightmare of the Atlantic slave trade and the experiences of
African people who reached the shores of America. It’s about having to
deal with racism and discrimination. It’s about surviving, in spite of all
of this. This piece not only represents my relationship with my dad but
also with my own people and what happened to us (Robinson, 2002).
Questions: Did anything good come from the horror of slavery? Does the historic experience of slavery still affect African-Americans? How? Are there people who are still enslaved? What or who has enslaved them? If so, how can we help put an end to it?

Actions: Have students discuss a type of contemporary enslavement (mass media concepts of women; the uninsured; poverty; gender, racial, class discrimination etc.) and have them develop a response in the form of a poem and/or poster, a political cartoon, or a letter to the editor to their school or local newspaper.

Sellsville Memory Map

Robinson spent many hours as a young girl listening to the stories her Uncle Alvin, her mother’s oldest brother, told about the old neighborhoods and the colorful characters who lived and worked in them. After carefully recording the conversations with her uncle in her notebooks, she researched the communities in the files and city directories of the public library and the historical society. She combined the historic information with her uncle’s stories and created lively cloth paintings, carefully rendered drawings, and mixed media sculptures in which these communities are brought back to life. In large cloth paintings she calls “memory maps,” Robinson carefully records every detail of a particular neighborhood. For example, in documenting Sellsville, she created a memory map of an integrated circus community that had its winter quarters in Columbus at the turn of the last century. Sellsville Memory Map (see Figure 11) includes in minute detail all the performers, animal pits, buildings that housed the workers, and shops and businesses that supported the circus. “I just enjoy digging up old communities that are no longer there,” noted the artist (Robinson, 2002) about this work, “…I feel it is very
important to bring those communities out. They existed. And there are many more communities that are no longer around that are colorful and really should be excavated and brought back to life” (p. 97).

**Questions:** Is it important to remember the past? Why or why not? How do we insure that people and communities are remembered? Who decides what history is recorded in textbooks? In art history books? What is left out and why? Is history ever complete?

**Actions:** Contact the oldest person you know who is capable of remembering his or her past; carefully compose questions to ask that reflect the person’s personal experiences and also the social circumstances of the time; interview the person, and document the interview by writing a story, poem, a letter, or song or by using photography or video.

*One Day in 1307 AD: King Abubakari II*

In her work Robinson gives voice to those who have been silenced in the past. Since she was a young child, Robinson has served as her community’s griot (a storyteller in West Africa) by collecting the stories and creating art that tells the precious, almost forgotten tales of her community that began in Africa centuries ago and continue today in Columbus, Ohio. Some of these paintings and sculptures are counternarratives in which Robinson seeks to question a dominant story by depicting an alternate possibility. *One Day in 1307 A.D.: King Abubakari II* (see Figure 17), a complex beaded, buttoned, RagGonNon with music boxes, is the story of the King of Mali, a courageous explorer, who gave up his throne and crossed the Atlantic with a fleet of two thousand ships. Malian scholars (Diawara, G. as cited in Austin, 2002) believe he reached Brazil nearly 200 years before Columbus landed in the Americas. In addition to revealing the possibility that an African might well have accomplished the feat of reaching the
Americas long before a European, this lavish depiction proudly proclaims the power, influence, and wealth of the Mali empire in the fourteenth century. In the RagGonNon, Robinson connects the past, present, and future by including references to the Middle Passage, her community in Columbus, and to her young son Sydney. The piece is infused with applied three-dimensional hinged figures and spirit pouches. “Such figural pieces,” writes art historian Ramona Austin (2002), “are the New World descendents of Kongo nkisi, known in the New World as pointos riscados, pacquet Kongo, and mojos. They are engines of spirit force made active by medicines and the sounds of speech that charge and make myth the fuel in Robinson’s work” (p. 55). Robinson’s Abubakari is a powerful testimony to her effectiveness as a storyteller, but it is also a strong critical attack on the legitimacy of the grand narrative of history as we have come know it.

**Questions:** Who is “in charge” of writing history? Is there a single history? Explain

Are the spirit figures Robinson creates and the African spirit figures that inspired them art? Why or why not? Is it useful or harmful to consider these objects works of art? Why do you think so?

**Actions:** Find an example of an important event that you think has been underrepresented in your history, social studies, language arts, or art history textbooks and write an entry to add to the textbook; illustrate it with a photograph, drawing, etc.

*The Line: Buckeye Federal Bank, Mt. Vernon Avenue*

By analyzing Robinson’s work through the lens of feminist theory, its content reveals her efforts to demonstrate the resilience of oppressed black women through personal and historic examples. In an autobiographical drawing, *The Line: Buckeye Federal Bank, Mt. Vernon Avenue*, 1971 (see Figure 12), she captured her personal
anguish of being a single mother on welfare by depicting the endless line of predominantly female African Americans waiting to cash their welfare checks. In a similar drawing of the same period, she compares the welfare system to slavery by depicting the crowded conditions of the waiting room in the welfare office. In the drawing she titled *Relics of Slavery (Study #1), One Day in the Welfare Sittin’ Room*, the figures’ bent postures and vacant eyes capture the hopelessness of their situations.

**Questions:** What is the purpose of our welfare system? Is it a form of humanization or dehumanization? Why does Robinson equate the welfare system with slavery? What are the effects of growing up poor? Are there ways to help those who are in poverty that are liberating rather than dehumanizing? How? What is a charitable organization? What types of charitable organizations exist in your community and what services do they offer? What types of service can a person your age offer to an individual? An organization? A community? Should community service be a part of school curriculum?

**Actions:** As a class, brainstorm a list of problems your community faces. Students select a problem and use the internet or telephone book to find out what types of government agencies, charitable organizations, institutions, and individuals exist to help. Students create posters illustrate the problem and that include factual information about where to find help.

*Spiritual and My Lord, What a Morning*

In her depictions of the Middle Passage, slavery, and the northern migration during the Civil War period, Robinson examines the effects of these historical events on African-Americans, particularly women. Her narrative paintings, sculptures, and drawings emphasize the courageous roles played by women as they attempted to survive.
the horrid, inhumane conditions of the Middle Passage and slavery and the dignity with which they struggled to keep their families together when they fled the South as escaped and freed slaves. In a literal way, Robinson honors the voices of women by using them to personify African-American spirituals. In *Spiritual: Let My People Go* (see Figure 8), a published book she wrote and illustrated, she uses drawings of women to symbolize the power of African-American spirituals. In *My Lord, What a Morning* (see Figure 9), she assembled a “music box” by combining a set of ten antique wooden organ pipes with the workings of music boxes that play the spiritual *My Lord, What a Morning*. The pipes are painted to represent women and crowned with found pieces of aged decorative metal fencing. “I have always done spirituals throughout my life,” reflects Robinson, “they are all women because we’re the ones who pass it on. During slavery, women were the ones who kept things together. They were strong women like my mother. We don’t have that kind of woman now—that kind of strength. We didn’t go through those kinds of things the slaves went through. They built the bridges so we didn’t have to go through those kinds of struggles” (Columbus Museum of Art, 2002, p. 71). Early in her career, in a yellowed paperback edition of *The African Background Outlined* by Carter G. Woodson (1969), Robinson underlined the following sentence, “Among people passing through an ordeal art develops” (p. 452). Woodson made the comment in regard to black spirituals that had developed from “the suffering of African souls.” The women in the spirituals constitute a long line of African Americans beginning with those who survived the Middle Passage and slavery and extending to those who live in the present.

**Questions:** Why do you think Robinson personifies African-American spirituals as women? Do you think men could also represent the spirituals? Why or why not? Do you
think human suffering is likely to produce art or discourage its production? Why? Give some examples. How does Robinson’s representation of women differ from representations you find in current magazines and newspapers and on television and in film?

**Actions:** Create a collage that exposes stereotypes of a certain group of people (women, men, African Americans, teens, Native Americans, Latinos, etc.). Use materials from magazines, newspapers, the internet, catalogues, etc.
APPENDIX B

VISITOR SURVEY

EDUCATION SURVEY – COLUMBUS MUSEUM OF ART

Please answer the following questions to help us evaluate the Museum’s presentation of *Symphonic Poem: The Art of Aminah Brenda Lynn Robinson*.

1. I visited *Symphonic Poem* ____ on my own ____ on a guided tour.

2. I visited the exhibition ____ number of times. This time, ____ alone or ____ with family or friend(s) ____ other _________________.

3. Did the exhibition or any work of art in it trigger a particular memory, story, or experience from your life? ____ yes ____ no
   If yes, describe the memory, story, or experience.

4. Did you learn anything new about the history of Columbus, Africa, the Middle Passage, slavery, Sapelo Island, Israel, etc? ____ yes ____ no
   If yes, explain:

5. Did the exhibition affect the your view of African-American history in Columbus or of African-American history in general? ____ yes ____ no Please explain:
6. Overall, what did the exhibition communicate to you?

7. What meaning, if any, do the following terms have for you?
   ___ RagGonNon _____________________________________________________
   ________________________________________________________________
   ___ Hogmawg ____________________________________________________
   ________________________________________________________________
   ___ Middle Passage ________________________________________________
   ________________________________________________________________

8. Would you recommend this exhibition to friends?  ____ yes  ____ no

9. When visiting an art exhibition, which of the following do you prefer?
   ___ guided tour by museum staff or docent (guide)
   ___ guided tour by museum staff or docent (guide) and reading the
     supportive information
   ___ recorded audio tour
   ___ viewing the work on your own and using the supportive information
       provided in text, videos, or recorded tours
   ___ viewing the work with no supportive information

10. In the exhibition, did you use any of the following?
    ___ text panel introductions to each section of the exhibition  ____ labels
    ___ text with information and artist’s quotes next to works of art
10. What type of media was most helpful in understanding the exhibition?
   ____ video   ____ catalogue   ____ To Be a Drum manuscript and/or book

11. Do you think the amount of supportive information in the exhibition was:
   _____ too little   _____ just right   _____ too much

12. Did you attend any programs related to the exhibition?   ____ yes   ____ no
   If yes, which one(s)?  ____________________________
   If yes, how did it affect your understanding of the exhibition?

13. Please add any additional comments about your experience of the exhibition.

**Demographic Information**

1. Is this your first visit to the Columbus Museum of Art?   ____ yes   ____ no

2. In what city and state do you live?  _________________ city         _________ state

3. Are you a member of the Columbus Museum of Art?   ____ yes   ____ no
   Are you a member of another art museum?   ____ yes   ____ no

4. About how many times per year do you visit the Columbus Museum of Art?  ______
   About how many times per year do you visit other art museums?  _______

5. Are you   _____ female       _____ male

6. Are you:   _____ white   _____ African American   _____ Asian
   _____ Hispanic   _____ Native American   _____ other _______________________

7. Are you a _____ teacher or a _____ student? If so, what level? __________________

Thank you for taking the time and thought to complete this survey. Please return it to:
Education Survey, Columbus Museum of Art, 480 E. Broad St., Columbus, OH 43215.
APPENDIX C

EDUCATOR SURVEY

ART MUSEUM EDUCATION SURVEY

1. At your art museum, exhibitions are selected by: (check as many as apply)
   - [ ] curators
   - [ ] executive director
   - [ ] educators
   - [ ] team consisting of ___________________________
   - [ ] exhibition committee of the board of trustees
   - [ ] others ____________________________________________

2. The content of exhibitions organized by your museum is determined by:
   - [ ] educators
   - [ ] curators
   - [ ] outside scholars
   - [ ] others ____________________________________________

3. At your art museum, please indicate who is involved with the educational presentation of exhibitions in regard to:

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<th>Curators</th>
<th>Educators</th>
<th>Educator/curator team</th>
<th>Other—explain below</th>
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<td>Other—explain below</td>
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4. In which areas, are educators directly involved?
   - [ ] selecting an exhibition
   - [ ] scheduling an exhibition (time of year)
   - [ ] developing exhibition information (text, extended labels, audio guides, videos, etc.)
   - [ ] developing programming after the exhibition has been selected and developed
scheduling tours
producing materials for schools
training docents or tour guides

Who does the actual training? _______________________
or other _________________________

5. Do you think your education department currently has the right level of involvement in exhibitions?  ☐ yes  ☐ no  If no, please explain:

6. On your museum’s organizational chart, educators are:

☐ on the same level with curators
☐ on a higher level than curators
☐ below curators
☐ other _________________________

Comments:

In regard to salaries, do you think educators at your museum are:

☐ on the same level as curators
☐ on a higher level than curators
☐ below curators

Comments:

7. The title of the head of education at your museum is _________________________
At your museum, the director of education reports to the _________________________
_______________, who reports to the _________________________.

8. The title of the head of curatorial affairs at your museum is_____________________
_______________ . The head of the curatorial department reports to the
__________________________, who reports to the _________________________.

DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

Approximate number of yearly visitors to your museum ____________
Number of full-time staff at your museum ______
Number of years you have been a museum educator  ____
Number of years at you have been at present museum  ____
Your undergraduate major ______________________________________
Graduate study, if any _________________________________________
Name (optional) _________________________  For a copy of the survey results,
Address ________________________________________________________________

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey. Please return it to
Carole Genshaft, 2381 Fair Avenue, Columbus, Ohio 43209 (envelope enclosed)
APPENDIX D

Figure 1. Aminah Brenda Lynn Robinson on her front porch. Photograph by Carole M. Genshaft

Figure 2. Aminah Brenda Lynn Robinson, American, b.1940. *Roots Begin with Goree Island*, detail, 1980. Pen and ink and pencil with thread and beads on homemade paper. 10 ½ x 55 ¼ in. Photograph by Jeff Bates. Collection of the artist. © Aminah Brenda Lynn Robinson
Figure 3. Aminah Robinson’s Doll House studio, Columbus, Ohio. Photograph by Jeff Bates.

Figure 4. Aminah’s front yard. Photograph by Carole Genshaft.


Figure 8. Aminah Brenda Lynn Robinson, American, b.1940. *Spiritual: Let My People Go*, 1969-72. Pen and ink with natural dyes on Pellon™, 74¼ x 27¼; 75 ½ x 14 ½; 75 ½ x 11 ½ x 74 ¾ x 24 ¾ inches. Photograph by Jeff Bates. Collection of Loann Crane. © Aminah Brenda Lynn Robinson


Figure 20. Aminah Brenda Lynn Robinson, American, b.1940. *John T. Ward Transporting Fugitive Slaves in Columbus, Ohio, to Freedom, 1800s*, 1982. Wood, hogmawg, and found objects, 24 ½ x 63 x 30 ½ inches. Photograph by Jeff Bates. Columbus Museum of Art, gift of JP Morgan Chase. © Aminah Brenda Lynn Robinson
REFERENCES


Columbus Art Association (1900). Report (p. 13). Columbus, OH: Author.


In Columbus Museum of Art, Symphonic poem: The art of Aminah Brenda Lynn Robinson (pp. 27-43). Columbus, OH: Author.


