

**Riffs and Relations:  
African American Artists and the European Modernist Tradition**

**AUDIO GUIDE**

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Three ways to use the audio guide:

(1) Connect to free “phillips” Wi-Fi, go to [www.bit.ly/riffs-tour](http://www.bit.ly/riffs-tour) on your smartphone browser, and select the stop number

or (2) Dial **202.595.1839** and enter the stop number

or (3) Download the free **Phillips Collection app**

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## Stop 1

**Mickalene Thomas (b. 1971)**

***Le Déjeuner sur L’herbe: Les Trois Femmes Noires*, 2010**

Color photograph and paper collage on cardboard,  
10 x 12 in.

Collection of the artist



Hello, this is Adrienne L. Childs, guest curator of *Riffs and Relations: African American Artists and the European Modernist Tradition*. Welcome.

This exhibition examines the diverse ways that African American artists have reacted to and interacted with modernist art and artists. Early 20th-century European modernists changed the direction of Western art with daring new approaches to form and content. Many of the African American artists in the exhibition were deeply impacted by this revolution and considered themselves modernists. As the 20th century progresses, others resist the powerful and complex forces of modernism and question the practices that often-excluded people of color from the mainstream art world.

*Riffs and Relations* begins with a deep dive into African American artists who have responded to Édouard Manet’s famous 1863 painting *Luncheon on the Grass*. Many of these artists “riff” on Manet by taking the composition from his work and making it their own—adding new figures and contexts that represent their artistic, cultural, and social concerns. Mickalene Thomas’s *Le Déjeuner sur L’herbe: Les Trois Femmes Noires* boldly infiltrates Manet’s *Luncheon*. Three stylish Black women assume the familiar poses, gazing back at us, asserting their power, sensuality and beauty. Look around the gallery at how other artists have taken on Manet in a variety of compelling ways.

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## Stop 2

**James Lesesne Wells (1902-1993)**

***Primitive Girl*, 1929**

Linoleum cut, 7 1/2 x 7 in.

David C. Driskell Collection, Permanent loan to the David C. Driskell Center at the University of Maryland, College Park



My name is Melanee C. Harvey and I am assistant professor in art history at Howard University. James L. Wells was a leader in a class of artists who pushed the stylistic boundaries of modernism through printmaking. He once said: “I combine lithography or any method anything to make the image work.” His art history is emblematic of experiences of artists that traveled the great migration north. He was born in Atlanta, Georgia, in 1902 and spent his childhood in Florida. He traveled north to Lincoln University for education but he received degrees from Columbia University where he earned a bachelor of science degree and a masters of arts in art education. As one of the leading illustrators of American modernism and of the Harlem Renaissance, his art engaged in cultural work, frequently appearing in labor publications such as the *New Masses*, African American publications including *Opportunity*, *The Crises* and *The Messenger*. In 1927 he turned to woodcuts and linocuts. For Wells his primary aim was to compose units which are enclosed in a fine relationship of line tone and color. His art reflects the influence of African Art, German Expressionism, Cubism, and the Social Realist movement of the 1930s.

Alain Locke viewed the art of James Wells and Aaron Douglas as representing an early experimental phase of modern art emerging from Harlem. James Wells benefitted from the combination of perfect art conditions. He was an active participant in the modern art scene with peers he knew and exhibited with including Max Beckman and Georgia O’Keeffe. He had access to and was influenced by the African art he saw on view at the Brooklyn Museum of Art. He was directly engaged in the artistic synergy of Harlem and throughout his lifetime was influenced by the labor movement. In 1928, his image of a tired sharecropper was one of his first illustrations to be published with the *New Masses*. James Wells’s use of “primitivist” symbols like masks represent how African American artists invested new meaning in American art. It highlighted a range of ideologies and critical stances found in African American urban communities. In 1929 when Wells completed *Primitive Boy* and *Primitive Girl*, for Wells “primitive” is not an ethnographic type but a modernist icon. Wells uses the mask as a symbol, a cultural reference, but also a means of critiquing black faced minstrelsy practices in America.

In 1929, Wells began teaching at Howard University. From 1929-1968 he taught courses in design including printmaking, ceramics, and clay modeling. Wells can be seen as a central figure that linked the New Negro aesthetic movement of Harlem with the art education and culture of Howard University. Outside of Howard, he worked alongside Palmer Hayden to provide art education to children and adults at the Harlem Art Workshop. He also provided art instruction for the Civilian Conservation Corps Camp in Pennsylvania. In 1929, the same year that he joins Howard’s faculty, his art is included in

the exhibition *International Modernist* at the New Art Circle gallery in New York City. His inclusion was a recognition of his contributions to American art, the range of his production across paintings and printmaking, the stylistic range, and the diversity in theme including labor imagery, religious scenes, mythological subjects, as well as abstraction and social realism. James Wells was a master educator who taught over 2,000 students in printmaking, ceramics, drawing, and art education. His notable alum and students include Dr. David C. Driskell, Georgette Seabrooke Powell, Elizabeth Catlett, Sylvia Snowden, Starmond de Bullock, Mary Lovelace O'Neil, and Dr. Richard J. Powell.

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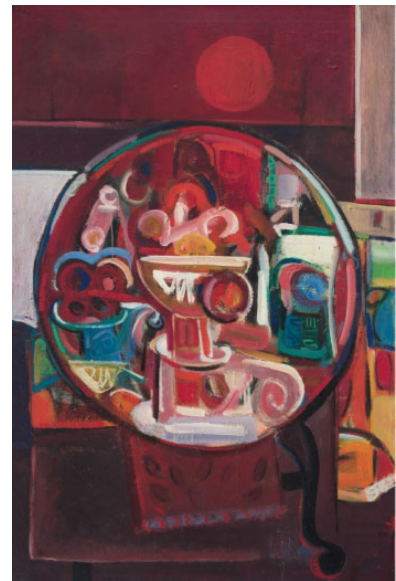
## Stop 3

**David C. Driskell (b. 1931)**  
***Still Life with Sunset*, 1966**

Oil on canvas, 48 x 32 in.

Collection of Joseph and Lynne Horning

Hello, I am David C. Driskell. *Still Life with Sunset* is a work that I did in 1966 while teaching at Howard University. During that period, I was heavily engaged with still life subjects and I continue to be fascinated by the beauty and spirit of everyday objects. I was particularly interested in the round format and used it as a compositional strategy for my interiors. This work features a round table and other objects including a compote dish that appears in several works from this period and remains in my home today. I was interested in flattening out the objects on the table using the elements and strategies that one gets in Synthetic Cubism. I studied and admired Georges Braque and Juan Gris, among other modernists, who used Cubism as a means of empowering ordinary forms. I have always been interested in the dynamics of color which is a direct result of my study with Lois Jones when I was a student at Howard. The deep reds evoke the sunset that is seen at the top of the painting. Here I am blending the exterior and the interior into one unified composition. It is a pleasure to be exhibited at The Phillips Collection, as I frequently visited as a young artist in the 1960s because I always felt welcome here.



## Stop 4

**Janet Taylor Pickett (b. 1948)**

***And She Was Born*, 2017**

Acrylic on canvas with collage, 30 x 30 in.

Collection of the artist

Hello, my name is *Janet Taylor Pickett*. I am the artist that created *And She Was Born* in 2017, an acrylic painting on stretched canvas with collage elements. I am excited that *And She Was Born* is hanging next to M. Matisse's iconic work

*Interior with Egyptian Curtain*; it has been an inspiration for me as an artist for over 40 years. Ironically it was created the same year as my birth in 1948. I have been in an artistic conversation with Henri Matisse for many years. His interior works especially have inspired me. I have admired and respected how he was able to juxtapose abstraction from non-European cultures into his own visual vocabulary. I also love his powerful use of the color black in *Interior with Egyptian Curtain*, as well as his use of line, and most of all the actual Egyptian curtain from his collection of African textiles as well as the window that looks from the interior to the exterior with palm fronds—out of all of this, *And She Was Born* was birthed into being.

For me, black is more than a color in my work as well as in my biography as an artist. I am a narrative artist. I tell stories through my work, as well as leave a bit of mystery for the viewer. This color, black, is layered with meaning, both artistically and metaphorically. Black is full of potential and implies fertility, and growth, even out of strife. I am “riffing” not so much with improvisation, but in a more focused manner. In my work, the line represents light illuminating form into being, just as Matisse used his line to define the illusion of space. For my work, the light illuminating line is emerging to create this female form—an African woman inspired by the tribal decorations of the Surma and Mursi people of East Africa and their intimate, spiritual, and creative interaction with nature. She is “being born” out and into her blackness with arms akimbo in her power stance, surrounded by the lyrical patterns inspired by *The Egyptian Curtain*, wearing her headdress and painted face from the bounty of nature with an air of insouciance.



## Stop 5

**Mequitta Ahuja (b. 1976)**

***Xpect*, 2018**

Oil on canvas, 84 x 72 in.

Collection of the artist



This is Mequitta Ahuja, painter of the work titled *Xpect*. In *Xpect*, my subject is on a studio set up of chairs covered by a blue cloth. She is posing, semi-reclined in front of a painting. Putting multiple pictures within my paintings is a way for me to create complex meanings and to tell a layered story. The inner black-and-white painting is my rebuttal to Picasso's 1907 painting *Les Femmes d'Alger* (O version). Picasso's painting is about the threat and allure of sex. Picasso presents woman—her body and her seduction—as an embodiment of that tension. I, too, address the threatening aspect of sex, but from a woman's point of view. In my rebuttal to the Picasso, I depict my range of feelings from determination to despair throughout my process of trying to conceive. In *Xpect*, I conclude that story with a declaration and celebration of my pregnancy. I focus on the emotional experience of my subject, telling my story while also telling a story about painting.

My mission with my art is to change expectations of the self-portrait, especially the self-portrait of a woman or a person of color. We are expected to mine our personal biographies as case studies in our social condition. I put in my work both current ideas about individuality including self-identity, a value for introspection and autobiography, as well as the past function of self-portraiture—presenting the artist as master of pictorial representation including its history. By merging past and present ideas of self-portraiture, my paintings shift the genre's old and current conventions.

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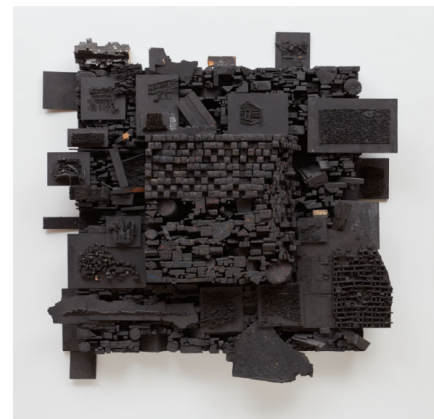
## Stop 6

**Leonardo Drew (b. 1961)**

***Number 192*, 2016**

Wood, paint, and Conte crayon, 59 x 59 x 12 in.

Collection of Robert and Patti Bleicher



Hello, I am Leonardo Drew. I am looking at *Number 192* created in 2016, a little while ago. But it's a grid, a very innovative grid in black, which is actually one of my favorite colors to date. As I am looking at this very complicated version of what I usually do, this is definitely something that I think begs for some other level of meditation. It is quiet dimensional. In terms of the grid, it is broken up into



different configurations to create grid on top of grid, from the smallest to the very largest aspects. The maquettes [along the border] are part of older works. Nothing is sacred in the studio, so actually dismantling and taking apart things [happens]. This piece is that and then some. Complex, layered, dark, moody, emotional, spiritual, all those things wrapped into one piece that is only four feet by four feet.

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## Stop 7

**Hank Willis Thomas (b. 1976)**

*Icarus*, 2016

Quilt, 56 1/2 x 85 1/4 in.

Collection of Debbie and Mitchell Rechler



Greetings, this is Adrienne Childs, guest curator of *Riffs and Relations*. You are looking at Hank Willis Thomas's *Icarus*, a multidimensional work that engages the politics of contemporary sports through a conversation with Henri Matisse. One of four fabric-based works in the exhibition, *Icarus* draws upon powerful connections to Thomas's family quilt making tradition, as well as the legacy of African American and West African quilting. In this work, Thomas stitches together jerseys from American teams such as the Philadelphia 76ers, New York Knicks, and Los Angeles Lakers. Thomas's *Icarus*, tumbling through the sky among bursts of yellow, directly quotes Matisse's *Icarus* from his *Jazz* series, on view here across the gallery. This work is part of Thomas's *Beautiful Game* series in which he takes on the racial dynamics of global sports and its reliance on black athletes who labor in a lucrative system in which they are often treated as commodities. By engaging with modernists such as Matisse, Thomas relates this critique to the modernist appropriation of African art.

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## Stop 8

**Aaron Diehl**

As part of Phillips Music's Sunday Concerts series, celebrated pianist and composer Aaron Diehl, inspired by *Riffs and Relations*, weaves between jazz and classical styles as he explores the cross-pollination between musical forms.



**Frank Stewart (b. 1949)**

***Romare Bearden, 1980s (printed 2019)***

Gelatin silver print

14 × 11 in.

Collection of the artist

Hi, my name is Aaron Diehl. I am a pianist and a composer, and I chose a photograph of Romare Bearden shot by Frank Stewart. As a boy, I grew up with two Bearden lithographs above my piano in my parents' house in Columbus, Ohio. The first was *The Fall of Troy* and then the other was *Morning*. I was always fascinated by these two collages and what they represented, a Greek myth that is then transferred to a modern African American narrative.

I chose the *Vagabond*, my own composition, that you will be hearing. The album refers to my own influences that are derived from European classical music and also the folk traditions of African American music and jazz. So I hope you enjoy.