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By **BENJAMIN GENOCCHIO**  
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"Harriet Tubman," a 1931 oil painting by Aaron Douglas.

At its most creative and inspired, philanthropy can alter lives, or even a society. That is the message of "A Force for Change: African American Art and the Julius Rosenwald Fund," a thoughtful show at the Montclair Art Museum.

The Rosenwald Fund was a philanthropic organization created in 1917 by the Chicago businessman Julius Rosenwald (1862-1932), who made a fortune as the part owner, president and chief executive of Sears, Roebuck & Company. His philanthropy supported the building of more than 5,000 schools for black students in the South and gave stipends to hundreds of black artists, writers, teachers and scholars.

The current exhibition, which originated last year at the Spertus Museum in Chicago, presents around 60 paintings, sculptures, photographs and works on paper by 22 Rosenwald fellows, who included such notable artists as Gordon Parks, Jacob Lawrence and Elizabeth Catlett. Most, but not all, of the artists are black; the program also offered fellowships to white Southerners with an interest in and concern for race relations.

The art on view dates from roughly the late 1920s to the late 1940s, a period when the fund was active as a grant-making body under the leadership of Edwin Rogers Embree. Mr. Rosenwald, whose philanthropy was influenced by Emil G. Hirsch, a Chicago rabbi, and Booker T. Washington,

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# Works That Testify to the Nurturing of Black Artists

believed that charities should devote their entire resources to addressing an immediate cause. The fund was devised to spend itself out of existence within 25 years of his death, and it officially closed in 1948.

The show is arranged mostly according to the order in which artists received fellowships, beginning with Augusta Savage, a talented but not particularly well known sculptor, teacher and activist associated with the Harlem Renaissance. She was the first visual artist to get a fellowship, which enabled her to study in Europe. "Gamin" (circa 1929), a realistic, painted plaster portrait of a black street child, was produced shortly before she left for France.



"Slow Down Freight Train," which Rose Piper completed in 1947 while on a Julius Rosenwald Fund fellowship in 1946.

Many of the artists in this show broach social themes in their work. Charles Alston made evocative pictures of farm life and poverty in the South, like "Farm Boy," showing here, an affecting portrait done in 1941, during his fellowship. It is painted in a realistic style that owes much to the work of the regionalist artists John Steuart Curry and Thomas Hart Benton.

"Farm Boy" won a purchase prize at the first annual Exhibition of Paintings, Sculptures and Prints by Negro Artists of America at Atlanta University in 1942. It is one of the better paintings in the show, along with "Harriet Tubman" (1931), an expansive, sensual mural painted in a flat, simplified style by Aaron Douglas, who got a fellowship in 1937 to travel in the South and in Haiti. The work shows Tubman, the antislavery activist, breaking the shackles of bondage.

Though "Harriet Tubman" predates the fellowship period, it was commissioned by Mr. Rosenwald's son-in-law, Alfred K. Stern, according to the exhibition catalog, which cites an article in the N.A.A.C.P. magazine *The Crisis*. Insofar as the mural emphasizes heroes and

heroines of black history, it is also typical of a lot of work in this exhibition. Several linoleum cuts from the *Negro Woman* series by Ms. Catlett depict extraordinary women like Tubman and Phillis Wheatley, one of the first black poets to be published in America.

Lamar Baker and Robert Gwathmey were two Southern white artists who received fellowships, in 1942 and 1944, respectively. Though neither was very talented, in my opinion, they shared an awareness of and sensitivity toward the cultural and historical roots of the black experience in America; Mr. Gwathmey painted images of black musicians in a style borrowed from Picasso, while Mr. Baker, a painter and printmaker, often dealt with the legacy of slavery.

Three early photographs by Mr. Parks, including perhaps his most famous image, "American Gothic, Washington D.C." (1942), produced during the year of his fellowship, attest to the importance of Mr. Rosenwald's bold and creative philanthropy. Produced when the artist was unknown, it shows a black cleaning woman posed before an American flag with a broom and a mop.

There are other interesting things here worth lingering over, including half a dozen Jacob Lawrence prints and some modernist works by Ronald Joseph and Charles Sebree.

Not all these artists went on to have successful careers, but that seems beside the point. Their work promoted new images of black Americans and challenged accepted, often racist notions of black creativity.

"A Force for Change: African American Art and the Julius Rosenwald Fund," through July 25.



"The Drape Maker," which Haywood Bill Rivers painted in 1948 during his fellowship.



"I Have Special Reservations," a linoleum cut from the *Negro Woman* series done in 1946 and 1947 by Elizabeth Catlett.



Montclair Art Museum

3 South Mountain Avenue, Montclair, NJ  
(973) 746-5555, [montclairartmuseum.org](http://montclairartmuseum.org)