

African American Art & the Julius Rosenwald Fund

by Daniel Schulman

One of America's most widely admired multi-millionaires in the 1920s and 1930s, Julius Rosenwald (1862-1932), chairman of Sears, Roebuck and Co., is largely forgotten today due to the radical nature of his giving. Rosenwald felt that philanthropies that were designed to spin off funds in perpetuity, such as those established by Carnegie, Rockefeller and Ford, ran the risk of becoming in time out-

moded, stale and overly conservative. Rosenwald advocated passionately for the special ability of private philanthropy to take risks and act boldly. He urged his contemporaries to follow his own model of establishing a date by which a fortune would be spent down in its entirety, income as well as principal. To Rosenwald, time devoted by foundation staff on perpetuating wealth, at the expense of devising ways of spending it effectively, was a waste of time and resources. After the Rosenwald Fund

closed in 1948, the name of Julius Rosenwald gradually faded from public memory.

A first generation American Jew, Rosenwald was influenced by two figures: his rabbi, a leading figure in Reform Judaism, Emil G. Hirsch, and the African American educator, writer, and leader Booker T. Washington. Hirsch argued that charity must involve social change and justice. Washington's emphasis on education spoke directly to Rosenwald, who himself never finished high school. From 1911 to 1928, Rosenwald's giving focused on black education in the American South. By providing seed money to build over 5,000 mostly elementary schools, Rosenwald touched the lives of hundreds of thousands of black school children who otherwise might not have had any education.

Rosenwald's philanthropy was redirected in 1928, when his fund was reorganized and professionalized. Largely due to the leadership of Edwin Embree, who had been hired away from the Rockefeller Foundation, the Rosenwald Fund focused on influencing public policy and improving opportunity for African Americans. Among Embree's earliest recommendations was to initiate a fellowship program, whereby support would be offered to men and women in creative and scholarly fields. Generous stipends (usually between \$1,500 and 2,000) allowed fellows to pursue their work or research for one, two and sometimes three years. Although grants were sometimes awarded to major figures in mid-career, such as W.E.B. DuBois and James Weldon Johnson, most went to younger artists and scholars who had been judged to possess exceptional promise. Because the grants were made directly to recipients, without strings attached, it is difficult to measure objectively the success of the program. But the Rosenwald Fund's track record of selecting deserving candidates speaks for itself.

The Great Depression cut deeply into the Rosenwald Fund's reserves, and few grants were awarded to visual artists in the



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LEFT: Haywood Bill Rivers, *The Drape Maker*, 1948, 22 3/16 x 18 3/16, The Baltimore Museum of Art, gift of the Waters Catering Company, Inc.

RIGHT: Robert Gwathmey, *Non-Fiction*, 1943, o/c, 29 x 24, Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester, New York, Marion Stratton Gould Fund.

BELOW RIGHT: Jacob Lawrence, *No. 13: John Brown after long meditation planned to fortify himself somewhere in the mountains of Virginia or Tennessee and there make raids on the surrounding plantations, freeing slaves*, 1977 (1942), screen print, The Walter O. Evans Collection of African American Art.

mid-1930s. However, as the Sears balance sheet began to recover later in the decade, the fellowship program was reinvigorated. From 1938 to 1948 thirty-four artists—nineteen African Americans and fifteen white southerners—were awarded fellowships. Unlike the 1930s grantees who went abroad to Europe or Haiti, many of 1940s recipients were more interested in exploring the American South and the legacy of slavery, reconstruction, and the Great Migration.

The fund recognized Jacob Lawrence as one of the country's most promising young artists by awarding him three consecutive years of support, from 1940 to 1942. While a Rosenwald fellow, Lawrence completed two of his greatest multi-panel narrative cycles, the *Migration of the Negro*, and the *John Brown Series*, as well as many of his *Harlem Paintings*. After their showing at the Downtown Gallery in New York in late 1941, the sixty-panel Migration Series was divided between the Museum of Modern Art and the Phillips Collection. The thirty panels that entered MoMA were purchased for the museum by Julius Rosenwald's daughter, Adele R. Levy. Lawrence completed his John Brown Series while living in New Orleans in 1941 and 1942. Beginning and ending with scenes of martyrdom, first of Christ and last of





ABOVE: William Ellisworth Artis, *Bust of Miss Coleman*, 1946, terra-cotta with wood base, 24 x 8 x 9, Howard University Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

LEFT: Eldzier Cortor, *Southern Landscape*, 1941, o/masonite, 34 1/4 x 25, ©Eldzier Cortor, courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, LLC.

BELOW LEFT: Charles White, *This, My Brother*, 1942, o/c, 24 x 36, The Art Institute of Chicago, Pauline Palmer Prize.

ABOVE RIGHT: Rose Piper, *Slow Down Freight Train*, 1946-47, o/c, 29 1/2 x 23 1/8, Ackland Art Museum, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Ackland Fund.

ABOVE FAR RIGHT: Jacob Lawrence, *No. 1: John Brown, a man who had a fanatical belief that he was chosen by God to overthrow black slavery in America*, 1977 (1942), screen print, The Walter O. Evans Collection of African American Art.

BELOW RIGHT: Aaron Douglas, *Harriet Tubman*, 1931, o/c, 54 x 72, Bennett College Art Gallery, Greensboro, North Carolina.



Brown, the series illustrates the fatal trajectory of the fanatical abolitionist whose actions presaged the Civil War. The original gouaches are in the collection of the Detroit Institute of Arts and are considered too delicate to travel. Fortunately, in 1977 Lawrence created twenty-two screen prints of the John Brown series.

Chicago artist Charles White called living in the South as a Rosenwald fellow in



the early 1940s “one of the deeply shaking and educative experiences” of his life. *This, My Brother*, a symbolic image of alienated black labor, imprisoned in the ruins of southern farm tenancy, was painted in New Orleans in early 1942. The despair and wasted potential of White’s black rural everyman is underlined by the useless heroic physical and gestural rhetoric borrowed from Michelangelo and El Greco.

Of the fifteen white southerners to receive Rosenwald grants in the visual arts, Robert Gwathmey achieved the most renown. A sixth generation Virginian, Gwathmey specialized in exposing the pretensions and hypocrisy of race and class superiority, particularly in the South. Gwathmey’s unreal and disturbing juxtaposition of a girl holding a baby in her arms and a life-sized, headless representation of a Jump Jim Crow Doll in *Non-Fiction* is a provocative image. The unlikely pair of figures, one glowering madly, the other dancing gaily, are both enmeshed in barbed wire underfoot.

Rosenwald fellows Eldzier Cortor and Rose Piper produced less caustic visions of the American South. For Chicagoan Cor-



tor, whose work has seldom been looked at in the context of larger trends in American art, the South was a place to visit in the imagination. Like Cortor, Rose Piper was an urban northerner fascinated by black culture of the South. Her Rosenwald project was to study blues compositions and

performers. *Slow Down Freight Train* clearly shows the influence of the post-cubist Picasso, filtered through the teachings of both Charles Alston, a Rosenwald recipient of 1939 who also traveled in the South during his grant, and Vaclav Vytlacil, who taught at the Art Students League.