



Portraits of a People: Picturing African Americans in the Nineteenth Century (Jacob Lawrence Series on American Artists)

Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw

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Recently, a number of cutting edge African American artists have investigated issues of race and American identity in their work, relying on the use of historical source material and the subversion of archaic media. This scrutiny of little known, yet uncannily familiar, racialized imagery by contemporary artists has created a renewed interest in the politics of nineteenth-century American art and the role of race in the visual discourse. "Portraits of a People" looks critically at images made of and by African Americans, extending back to the late 1700s when a portrait of African-born poet Phillis Wheatley was drawn by her friend, the slave Scipio Moorhead. From the American Revolution until the Civil War and on into the Gilded Age, American artists created dynamic images of black sitters. In their effort to create enduring symbols of self-possessed identity, many of these portraits provide a window into cultural stereotypes and practices. For example, while some of these pictures were undoubtedly of distinct, named individuals, many are now known by titles that reference only generalized types, such as Joshua Johnston's painting Portrait of a Man, 1805-10, or the silhouette inscribed 'Mr. Shaw's blackman', cut around 1802 by the manumitted slave Moses Williams. By the middle of the nineteenth century, photography began to offer black sitters an affordable and accessible way to fashion an individual identity and sometimes obtain financial support, as in the case of the numerous cartes-de-visites produced during the 1860s and '70s that bear the image of the feminist activist Sojourner Truth above the text, 'I Sell the Shadow to Support the Substance'. "Portraits of a People" features colour reproductions of over 100 important portraits in various media, ranging from paintings, photographs, and silhouettes to book frontispieces and popular prints. Essays by Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw consider silhouettes and African American identity in the early republic, photography and the black presence in the public sphere after the Civil War, and portrait painting and social fluidity among middle-class African American artists and sitters. This landmark publication will change the way that we view the images of blacks in the nineteenth century.

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