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GETTY RESEARCH INSTITUTE LAUNCHES AFRICAN AMERICAN ART HISTORY INITIATIVE AND WILL ACQUIRE ARCHIVE OF LOS ANGELES ARTIST BETYE SAAR

*Betye Saar archive is the first acquisition of major initiative
to collect, study, and disseminate African American art history*



Betye Saar in her Los Angeles studio, 2015; photo: Ashley Walker; courtesy of the artist and Roberts Projects, Los Angeles

LOS ANGELES – Today, the Getty Research Institute (GRI) announced the establishment of the African American Art History Initiative with the acquisition of the archive of world-renowned artist Betye Saar (American, b. 1926).

The African American Art History Initiative is an ambitious program to establish the Getty Research Institute as a major center for the study of African American art history. In addition to acquiring archives and related original sources, the initiative will establish a dedicated curatorship in African American Art History, a bibliographer with a specialty in the subject, annual research graduate and post-graduate fellowships, a program to conduct oral histories of notable African American artists, scholars, critics, collectors and art dealers, and partnerships with other institutions to digitize existing archival collections and collaborate on

joint conferences, publications, and research projects. The Getty is starting the project with an initial \$5M allocation and will be raising additional funds as the project develops.

"The Getty is making a strong, long-term commitment of unprecedented breadth to the field of African American art history," said James Cuno, president and CEO of the J. Paul Getty

Trust. "The study of African American art history is fundamental to a comprehensive understanding of American art history. We aim to bring our resources, talents, and relationships together to promote advanced research in an area of American art that has been underfunded and under researched."

Acquisitions and exhibitions

Archives play a central role at the GRI, which collects archives of artists, scholars, curators, and other cultural figures and makes them accessible to researchers all over the world. The GRI's unique collecting strategies and holdings allow researchers to make connections across disciplines and eras. Archives at the GRI are extensively catalogued and digitized, and archival research at the Getty often leads to or supports publications and exhibitions at the Getty and elsewhere.

Currently, the GRI is seeking a curator of modern and contemporary collections, specializing in postwar African American collections, a newly created position. Once hired, this curator will work with a dedicated bibliographer to acquire and digitize key collections and develop research projects, publications, and exhibitions about African American art.

While Betye Saar is not the first African American artist represented in the GRI's holdings – others include Adrian Piper, Kara Walker, Ed Bernal, Benjamin Patterson, Melvin Edwards, Lorna Simpson, Harry Drinkwater, and Mark Bradford – the purchase of her complete archive represents the first major acquisition related to the African American Art History initiative.

"Betye Saar is one of the most innovative and visionary artists of our era. She has also, in many ways, been the conscience of the art world for over fifty years and we are so honored that she has trusted us to preserve her powerful legacy," said Andrew Perchuk, acting director of the Getty Research Institute. "She played a large role in our exploration of postwar Los Angeles art that became *Pacific Standard Time: Art in LA 1945-1980*, and this acquisition is a particularly meaningful way for us to launch the African American Art History Initiative."

Betye Saar's pioneering assemblages and large-scale installations, grounded in unique materials and African American history, have had a profound and positive impact on artists and audiences nationally and internationally.

Saar began creating assemblages in the 1960s, combining her own drawings, prints, and etchings with found materials sourced from family albums as well as flea markets and

swap meets. Like many of her artist peers working in Los Angeles at the time, Saar was profoundly affected by the Watts rebellion in 1965 and the death of Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1968. She addressed the personal and societal effects of race in early assemblages like *Black Girl's Window* (1969) and introduced innovative materials such as leather, fur, yarn, plastics skulls, and poker chips in works like *Ten Mojo Secrets* (1972). Saar's deep interest in mysticism and cross-cultural spiritual practice can be



Betye Saar at the opening of "Betye Saar: Selected Works, 1964-73" Fine Arts Gallery, California State University, Los Angeles, 1973; photo: Fidel Danieli; courtesy of the artist and Roberts Projects, Los Angeles

seen in dozens of her large-scale assemblages such as the shrine-like *Mti* (1973) and *Spiritcatcher* (1977). She works from a vast collection of found objects and images, some of which include derogatory and racist images of African Americans. In one of her most politically potent and groundbreaking works, *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima* (1972), she recast the stereotypical figure of the Mammie, the Southern black nanny and domestic servant, as an empowered woman by combining this persistent symbol of black female servitude (including the eponymous Aunt Jemima from the pancake mix box) with a Black Power fist and a toy rifle.

Saar was at the center of an animated Los Angeles art scene in the 1970s, collaborating and exhibiting with established artists like Charles White (American, 1918-1979) as well as with younger, experimental artists who coalesced around nascent galleries like Suzanne Jackson's Gallery 32 and Dale and Alonzo Davis's Brockman Gallery. Saar organized exhibitions of black women artists including *Black Mirror* (1973) and became active in the feminist art movement, serving on the board of the non-profit organization Womanspace with artist Judy Chicago (American, b. 1939). She was the subject of major exhibitions at the Whitney Museum of American Art and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in 1975, the Studio Museum in Harlem in 1980, and the MOCA Geffen in 1990 and, in recent years, Saar's stature has only continued to grow. Her work is in the collections of important museums

around the world. Following a major exhibition at the Fondazione Prada in 2016, in October 2018 an exhibition of her work will open at the National Gallery of Scotland. In 2019 she will have an exhibition organized by LACMA, which will travel to the Morgan Library in 2020.

The archive, *The Betye Saar Papers*, ranges from 1926 to the present covering her entire career and her life as an artist. The archive includes documentation of Saar's prolific artistic production and her notable works in diverse media: sketchbooks of ideas, concepts, and Saar's travels; prints and drawings; book illustrations and commercial graphics, as well as profuse documentation of her assemblages and installations. The archive features annual files on all aspects of Saar's projects: exhibitions, catalogues, brochures and posters; ledgers of works created with records of exhibitions, galleries, museums, and collectors; letters, artist's statements, and documentation on the circle of artists with whom Saar worked and collaborated. The archive comes with an important gift: a vintage photograph album depicting Saar's family and friends: the 1918 Beatrice Parson Family Photo Album.

"As a child of the Depression, I learned at an early age the importance of saving things. 'Use it up, wear it out, make it do, or do without' was a common saying during my childhood," said Saar. "As time went on, my saving turned into collecting, and collecting then evolved into the medium I use to create my art. Little did I know back then that my frugal roots would develop into a profession with such a creative outlet. I've taken great pride in preserving these items for some 80 plus years. Items such as my early childhood drawings all the way through to the art ledgers that I continue to use on a daily basis. I am very pleased that the Getty Research Institute shares my desire for 'saving things' and that they will be providing a home for many of my collections so that they will be accessible by scholars, the arts community and the generally curious alike."

Collaborations and Partnerships

Collaboration is an important part of the African American Art History Initiative and the Getty is consulting with the world's leading scholars as it builds the program. Dr. Kellie Jones, Professor in Art History and Archaeology and the Institute for Research in African American Studies (IRAAS) at Columbia University, has been hired by the Getty as a senior consultant. Jones is a MacArthur Fellow who has curated several landmark exhibitions of African American Art and published extensively, including the recently published [South of Pico: African American Artists in Los Angeles in the 1960s and 1970s](#) and [Now Dig This: Art and Black Los Angeles](#)

1960-1980 published to accompany the exhibition of the same title that was part of the Getty-funded "Pacific Standard Time: Los Angeles Art 1945-1980" in 2011. In her role as a consultant for the initiative she will help shape the strategic and intellectual directions of the project.

"The Getty is telling the world, through its actions, that American art has many facets," said Jones. "The Getty has set out to create benchmarks and expand the field of art history. This initiative and its focus on archives is another approach to embracing a bigger idea of what art history is, by creating an important repository that will greatly impact the field and peer institutions. And in partnering with other institutions, including historically black colleges, we are also creating community through scholarship. I'm especially excited to think about the educational possibilities, at all levels, that will come out of this work."

Additionally, the GRI has convened an advisory committee of leading scholars, artists, and curators for the African American Art History Initiative. With insights from their own scholarship and connections, the committee will advise on how the initiative can best serve the field and on a collecting strategy focused on growing the GRI's holdings related to African American art and cultural history. Currently, the members of the growing advisory board include Jones, Getty Trustee Pamela Joyner, Director of the Spelman College Museum of Fine Art Andrea Barnwell Brownlee, Curator of International Art at the Tate Modern in London Mark Godfrey, Hammer Museum Assistant Curator Erin Christovale, Bridget Cooks, Associate Professor of African American Studies and Art History at University of California, Irvine, and others.

Partnerships with other institutions are another crucial part of the initiative. The GRI has partnered with the UC Berkeley Oral History Center to conduct oral histories that are already underway in California, New York, and other parts of the country to record stories of African American artists in their 70s, 80s, and 90s. These one-on-one interviews address an urgent need to capture the first-person accounts of artists who have not been properly documented to date.

The GRI is also partnering with historically black colleges and universities to help those institutions maximize the research potential of their holdings through digitization and increased scholarly access.

"The Getty Trust's decision to develop a digital archive will provide scholars, researchers, teachers, students, curators and collectors—anyone passionate about the study of African American artists—easy access to primary reference material in some of the world's great

artists. Spelman College has just launched the Atlanta University Center collective for the Study of Art History and Curatorial Studies, thanks to the generosity of the Walton Family Foundation. We look forward to partnering with the Getty Trust in the course of establishing the collective, as our students become familiar with some of the country's leading archival resources in the field of African American Art History," said Mary Schmidt Campbell, president of Spelman College.

Other partnerships include museums and exhibition spaces such as the California African American Museum and Art + Practice in Los Angeles and The Studio Museum in Harlem.

The Getty's commitment to African American art history also extends to the J. Paul Getty Museum, which recently acquired twenty-one photographs from Gordon Parks's photo essay chronicling the life of a young Brazilian boy named Flavio da Silvia. On assignment for *Life*, Parks worked in Brazil in 1961 and again in 1977 documenting the plight of Latin Americans living in extreme poverty. The Getty Museum's acquisition includes seventeen photographs from Parks's original visit to Brazil and four from his subsequent trips. At the Getty Museum, the department of photography is unique in actively collecting American art of the 20th and 21st century.

"The Museum is proud of this significant acquisition," remarked Getty Museum Director Timothy Potts. "We are committed to building a collection of photographs by African American photographers as part of this important initiative."

Research Fellowships, Bibliographer, and Visiting Scholars

Building collections of African American art history includes growing library materials and facilitating on-site research. A full-time bibliographer will be hired by the GRI to help trace written histories and create resources for researchers.

Two fellowships will be offered every year bringing scholars to the Getty specifically to research African American art history. This is in addition to the existing Getty Scholars Program, which will continue to include scholars working on African American art history. Currently there are two scholars in residence at the Getty who have made significant contributions to African American art history: Darby English, Professor, University of Chicago and Consulting Curator MoMA, and Renee Ater, Associate Professor Emirata, University of Maryland. This year, the Getty Scholars Program artist-in-residence is Theaster Gates (American, b. 1973) who

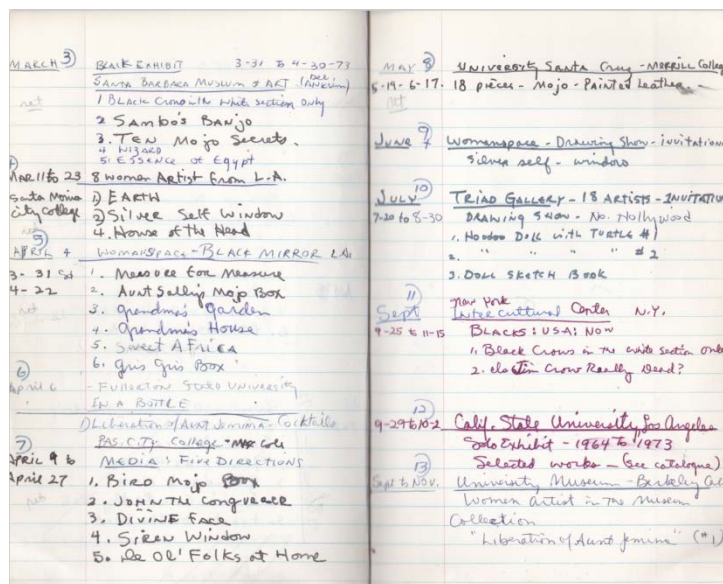
is using his research time at the Getty to explore radical philanthropy through the built environment.

"Similar to the commitment we made to expand research into Latin American and Latino art over the last several years, the Getty is seeking to once again focus attention on an under-researched area of art history," said Cuno. "I particularly want to thank the Getty's Board of Trustees for their enthusiastic support and endorsement of this exciting new initiative."

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The Getty Research Institute is an operating program of the J. Paul Getty Trust. It serves education in the broadest sense by increasing knowledge and understanding about art and its history through advanced research. The Research Institute provides intellectual leadership through its research, exhibition, and publication programs and provides service to a wide range of scholars worldwide through residencies, fellowships, online resources, and a Research Library. The Research Library—housed in the 201,000-square-foot Research Institute building designed by Richard Meier—is one of the largest art and architecture libraries in the world. The general library collections (secondary sources) include almost 900,000 volumes of books, periodicals, and auction catalogues encompassing the history of Western art and related fields in the humanities. The Research Library's special collections include rare books, artists' journals, sketchbooks, architectural drawings and models, photographs, and archival materials.

The J. Paul Getty Trust is an international cultural and philanthropic institution devoted to the visual arts that includes the J. Paul Getty Museum, the Getty Research Institute, the Getty Conservation Institute, and the Getty Foundation. The J. Paul Getty Trust and Getty programs serve a varied audience from two locations: the Getty Center in Los Angeles and the Getty Villa in Pacific Palisades.



Pages of Betye Saar's exhibition ledger from 1973.