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◆ Preface ◆

Contrary to what many people assume, history exists in two time frames: the past and the present. It is tempting to conclude that what happened in the past is over and done with, utterly unchanging despite the passage of time. But when you think about how much happens—in individual lives, in the lives of peoples and nations—you realize that in order to make sense of what took place, you need to select what is important from all the other, trivial things that happened in the past. At any given point, this selection takes place in the present. We have to select, because if we do not pull out what is important, the past remains a confusing, meaningless morass of detail. Making sense of the past is the work of historians, who create *historical narrative*. Historical narrative constructs a coherent story that makes sense to us now. Historical narrative endows certain people and events with historical importance and denies historical importance to other people and events.

Historical narrative changes over time: what we want to know about the past at one point in time differs from what we wanted to know at an earlier point, or, for that matter, what we will want to know in the future. We can see such changes clearly with regard to American history. Before the Civil Rights revolution of the 1960s—before black people began to be seen as truly American people—American history was largely the story of white people. In the past, relatively few readers of history wanted to know what African Americans were doing and thinking. Now, though, many people want to know. Similarly, before the women's movement of the 1970s—before women began to be seen as equal to men—American history was largely the story of men. Relatively few readers wanted to know what women were doing and thinking in the past. Now many want to know. Changes such as these are still under way, and the writing of history continues to evolve.

As new issues emerge, new questions surface, and the past yields new answers. For this reason, an African-American history written a generation ago no longer gives today's readers all the answers they seek. Not only have things happened in the intervening

years, but also we ask different questions of the past. We want to know what women did as well as men, what people thought who were not politicians, and what ordinary people made of their lives. We want to know how black people were portrayed in popular culture and how they countered ugly stereotypes. We want to know, for instance, that Black Power poetry of the 1960s and 1970s gave rise to rap in the 1970s and 1980s. We want to know the history of the holiday Kwanzaa, which did not even exist in 1964. A historian writing in the twenty-first century can explain these developments; someone writing in 1964 could not. But historians are not unique in asking questions of the past. People without specialized training or doctorates want to know about the past in order better to understand the present.

In this book I share the story with non-historians, notably black visual artists. Unlike academic historians, who are trained to view the past objectively, visual artists view the past in more personal terms—more subjectively. Most artists have not gone through graduate school in history or other preparation that makes them view the past as scholars. Black artists, as black people, have also waged their own struggles against racism in the art world: against art schools that would not admit them, galleries that would not represent them, and museums that did not see value in their work. Black art history, like black history as a whole, includes a crushing burden of racial and gender discrimination. American art history, like American history in general, seldom grapples with the fact of discrimination.

Not having to present injustice dispassionately, artists have felt freer than scholarly historians to present the emotional dimension of this history. Black artists, like most people who are not historians, engage more emotionally with the African-American past. Artists create artwork from their own personal experiences and from their understanding of the culture in which they live. For African Americans, that means recognizing the devastation wreaked by enslavement, segregation, and discrimination. Black artists have often said they aimed to present the unknown greatness of the African-American past. In ways that are different from and more passionate than those of historians, black artists have struggled against the misrepresentation of black people in United States history and culture.¹ African-American art recreates a people and a story that much in American history would obliterate.

Over the course of more than two centuries, black American artists have represented their history—scrupulously, meaningfully, and brilliantly. Their efforts represent a beautiful example of African-American historical *agency*, which makes black people historical actors, not passive victims of history. Thus visual artists play a significant role in the continuing creation of black Americans. The work of black artists contradicts demeaning conventional images of black people and puts black people's conception of themselves at the core of African-American history. Whereas U.S. culture has depicted black people as ugly and worthless, black artists dwell on the beauty and value of black people. Art, by definition, says, "this is beautiful; this is valuable." In many different ways, black artists depict black people as beautiful and their story as valuable. Artists

have also made ugly, racist violence visible, when American culture has tended to bury it or play down its importance. Depicting lynching, for example, artists have said, in effect, “this is meaningful; we need to pay attention to this.”

In choosing black artists’ images to accompany the narrative, I made several purposeful decisions. For example, the dates of creation fall mostly after the mid-twentieth century, even for images of people and events of earlier times. This is because before the 1920s very little work by black artists existed. Enslavement and poverty kept the number of working black artists pitifully small, and the few who existed seldom had the luxury of depicting black history. For instance, chapter 1, “Africa and Black Americans,” begins with a painting from 1944, not an undated illustration presented as though it were an eyewitness account of Africans as they were in the seventeenth century. The 1944 painting represents a mid-twentieth-century artist’s image of Africa—as Egypt. I do not pretend that it dates from the seventeenth century. The painting captures a conception of Africa that characterized black thinkers in the mid-twentieth century. In short, “1944” reminds us that every image has its own date and that black artists have a history of their own.

By emphasizing black art, *Creating Black Americans* makes black art history visible. The pitifully few black artists working before the 1920s rarely portrayed black figures. For until then, the art world did not consider black people as appropriate subjects for fine art. Black art history really begins in the 1920s, in the era of the Harlem Renaissance. Only then did a sizeable cohort of African-American artists appear, and only then did their work begin to be appreciated. (Their story appears in chapter 9.) During the mid-twentieth century, black artists produced an enormous number of works, mostly on the subject of workers and farmers. In the Black Power era of the late 1960s and 1970s, African motifs appear prominently in the work of black artists. *Creating Black Americans* reflects these changing styles and preferences. Since the 1980s, black artists have ranged across many genres—abstract as well as figurative—in the era that a prominent art critic termed “post-black.”²

Virtually all the images in *Creating Black Americans* are by African Americans. By conscious decision, negative stereotypes do not appear, unless in the work of black artists who are reworking them into emblems of empowerment. Although negative imagery still appears in American culture, I do not reinforce humiliating, insulting depictions of African Americans; better that my readers discover a rich new body of images produced by black people themselves.

Creating Black Americans uses images that art historians have already chosen as important (see Further Reading for an introduction to work by prominent black art historians). This selection of images does not begin to represent a cross-section of the work of black artists—far from it. Because this is a general history, not a history of art, it presents only art relating to African-American history and only art that explicitly addresses black themes. It neglects abstract art (even on historical themes) and images with details that do not reproduce clearly in small format. Some art I wanted to include does not appear

for lack of permission from holders of rights if reproduction. In such cases the notes guide readers to sources where images may be found. Concerns about the cost of the book also limit the number of illustrations. The first draft of *Creating Black Americans* contained about 250 images—a bounty that would have priced the book beyond the reach of many potential readers. I hope that readers will use Suggestions for Further Reading to deepen their knowledge of the wealth and variety of black art history.

Although the selection of artwork is limited, readers will notice that black artists have preferred certain subjects to others. Throughout the twentieth century, for example, black visual artists depicted two kinds of images repeatedly that were seldom featured in American fine art: ordinary, working people and violence inflicted upon people of African descent. Black artists illustrated—literally—the importance of these two themes. *Creating Black Americans* reflects the abundance of these images by emphasizing the lives of ordinary people and the violence so common in their lives.

Readers will notice that the dates of creation accompanying each image do not necessarily accord with the dates of the events being discussed. The dates of the art document the changing ways in which African Americans have conceived of their history. The contrast between the recent dates of the images and the age of the slave trade embodies tensions that exist throughout the book. I hope my explanation of method in chapter 2, “Captives Transported,” will sustain readers across the many pages that follow. Artists long avoided the all too painful issue of the Atlantic slave trade, and images of this history date only from the recent past. In chapter 2, I elaborate on artists’ renditions of the Atlantic slave trade. Readers may debate the reasons for avoidance and embrace of the Atlantic slave trade, knowing—perhaps for the first time—that a willingness to face this historical trauma is relatively new.

While black artists have produced myriad images of ordinary people at work, at home, and in their neighborhoods, until the Civil Rights era of the 1960s, artists seldom turned to subject matter related to war—including the Civil War—politics, business, or the professions. As antiblack stereotypes became less acceptable in American culture in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, black artists have felt less urgency to counter them. The family, on the other hand, remains a favorite topic for black artists, perhaps in response to the continuing stigmatization of black families in American culture. As a result of these preferences, the number of illustrations per chapter varies, in accordance with chapter content.

For interested readers, an alphabetical appendix with brief biographies of all the artists represented in the book appears at the end of this volume. Each entry includes birth and death dates, a list of where their art can be found in the book, a short précis of each artist’s life, and a brief guide to relevant print and (where possible) internet sources for further study.

The two central themes of *Creating Black Americans*—in both the narrative and the images—are material conditions and meaning. The theme of material conditions relates to politics, economics, and demographics: how many people were located in particular

places, how much money they made or did not make, what their legal status was. Where appropriate, the book includes tables to convey this information.³

The theme of meaning relates to the changing production of historical narrative in two ways: first, knowledge as a *process*, and, second, historical commemoration. The theme of knowledge as a process appears prominently in chapters 1 and 2, and influences the approach and organization of the chapters that follow. At every point in their history, African Americans have thought critically about their situation and their past and interpreted their meaning. Writers, artists, and musicians produced a steady stream of work presenting their versions of historical meaning. Historical commemoration—the process of creating holidays, monuments, and museums—began in the nineteenth century, but commemoration really gained strength at the end of the twentieth century. *Creating Black Americans* takes note of commemoration as part of a process of creating a coherent black American identity that also includes scholarship, art, and commentary.

Creating Black Americans seeks engaged readers who are interested not only in what happened, but also in the myriad meanings African Americans have found in their experiences. Black Americans have always been a numerous, diverse, and creative people whose history is richly varied. And black visual artists have forged a magnificent account of the creation of a people. Welcome to this introduction to a past rich in beauty and creativity, but also in tragedy and trauma. Welcome to the history of the creation of black Americans by black Americans.