

## THE BMA REVISITS HISTORY WITH *1939: EXHIBITING BLACK ART AT THE BMA*

### *Landmark Exhibition Attracted 12,000 Visitors to BMA in Two Weeks*

“Art in a democracy should above all else be democratic, which is to say that it must be truly representative.”

— Alain Locke, *Contemporary Negro Art*, 1939

BALTIMORE, MD (May 29, 2018)—In 1939, The Baltimore Museum of Art (BMA) presented one of the first major exhibitions in the U.S. to feature African American artists. *Contemporary Negro Art* served “as a declaration of principles as to what art should be in a democracy and as a gauge of how far in this particular province we have gone and may need to go,” wrote renowned philosopher and art critic Alain Locke in the exhibition brochure. Nearly 80 years later, the museum pays tribute to this exhibition with *1939: Exhibiting Black Art at the BMA*. On view June 13–October 28, 2018, it features 14 prints and drawings by artists who were included in the 1939 show along with archival materials.



“This exhibition centers on a decisive moment in the BMA’s history and highlights the value of the museum responding deliberately to community needs and desires with groundbreaking art exhibitions,” said BMA Dorothy Wagner Wallis Director Christopher Bedford. “I am very pleased to present the work of my predecessors as we look toward the future of this great museum.”

The origins of this landmark exhibition date back to 1937, when BMA Board of Trustees President Henry Treide extended a city-wide survey to over 200 social, labor, and special interest groups in Baltimore, inquiring what they most wanted from a city art museum. The committee representing Baltimore’s African American community responded with a recommendation that the museum’s galleries begin to display artwork generated by and for the black community. As a direct result of the feedback, the BMA hosted an exhibition of 116 works by 29 black artists in February 1939. The Harmon Foundation, a New York-based organization dedicated to the patronage of black cultural production coordinated the loans of artworks to the exhibition, which it co-organized with BMA Acting Director Charles Ross Rogers and renowned Howard University philosopher Alain Locke. More than 12,000 visitors saw *Contemporary Negro Art* during its two-week presentation at the BMA that year.

Highlights of *1939: Exhibiting Black Art at the BMA* include the first work by a black artist to enter the museum’s collection, Dox Thrash’s watercolor *Griffin Hills*, as well as works by Jacob Lawrence, James Lesesne Wells, and Hale Woodruff. The exhibition also draws attention to behind-the-scenes figures who worked on the project through archival materials shown publicly for the first time. These include president of the Baltimore Women’s Cooperative Civic League Sarah Collins Fernandis, NAACP president Lillie Mae Carroll Jackson, and renowned Civil Rights lawyer and activist Clarence Mitchell, Jr.

This exhibition is curated by BMA Prints, Drawings and Photographs Curatorial Assistant Morgan Dowty.

*1939: Exhibiting Black Art at the BMA* and related programs are made possible by the PNC Foundation.

### **THE BALTIMORE MUSEUM OF ART**

Founded in 1914, The Baltimore Museum of Art is a major cultural destination recognized for engaging diverse audiences through dynamic exhibitions and innovative educational and community outreach programs. The BMA's internationally renowned collection of 95,000 objects encompasses more than 1,000 works by Henri Matisse anchored by the famed Cone Collection of modern art, as well as one of the nation's finest holdings of prints, drawings, and photographs. The galleries showcase an exceptional collection of art from Africa; important works by established and emerging contemporary artists; outstanding European and American paintings, sculpture, and decorative arts; significant artworks from China; ancient Antioch mosaics; and exquisite textiles from around the world. The 210,000- square-foot museum is also distinguished by a grand historic building designed in the 1920s by renowned American architect John Russell Pope and two beautifully landscaped gardens featuring an array of 20<sup>th</sup>-century sculpture. The BMA is located in Charles Village, three miles north of the Inner Harbor, and is adjacent to the main campus of Johns Hopkins University. General admission to the BMA is free so that everyone can enjoy the power of art.

### **VISITOR INFORMATION**

General admission to the BMA is free. Special exhibitions may be ticketed. The BMA is open Wednesday through Sunday from 10:00 a.m. – 5:00 p.m. The museum is closed Monday, Tuesday, New Year's Day, July 4, Thanksgiving, and Christmas. The BMA is located at 10 Art Museum Drive, three miles north of Baltimore's Inner Harbor. For general museum information, call 443-573-1700 or visit [artbma.org](http://artbma.org).

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**Image:** Children viewing Ronald Moody's *Midonz* (1937) at The Baltimore Museum of Art's *Contemporary Negro Art* exhibition. 1939. Photograph Collection, Archives and Manuscripts Collections. AN6.40.