

Rising Up: Hale Woodruff's Murals from Talladega College Travel the Country

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Hale Aspacio Woodruff (1900-1980) was a master of many arts, including printmaking, draftsmanship, and painting. I first heard of Woodruff as a first-year college student at Clark Atlanta University, where he taught art and founded the Atlanta University (now Clark Atlanta University) art department. One set of his murals titled, *The Art of the Negro*, is housed in the atrium of Trevor Arnett Hall on the campus. As both a student of public health and visual artist, I was greatly influenced by his technique and skill as an artist and profoundly moved by his depiction of African American history.

Woodruff's legacy as a prolific art professor and visual historian is being remembered through the restoration of his murals from Talladega College through a nationally sponsored tour of *Rising Up: Hale Woodruff's Murals at Talladega College*.

I viewed his murals chronicling the history of Talladega College, the Amistad story, slavery, and other related themes at the 80WSE Galleries at New York University. To say seeing Woodruff's murals was an extraordinary moment would be an understatement. He not only traced the interpretive history of the Amistad saga in his large scale murals—brightly colored, historically sound, and distinctly original—but he portrayed how African-Americans lived after slavery: in physical conditions that undermined their health and dignity.

Several of Woodruff's smaller pieces illustrate his concern with poverty, especially housing conditions of poor black families depicted in scenes of outdoor bathroom facilities, shacks, and community wells. As the artist chronicled—and many public health historians have confirmed—the urban population increased dramatically during the early 1930s. Fears within the white community of competition, decreased property values, and integrated schools further exacerbated the depredations of segregation.¹ These smaller works, such as *Results of Poor Housing*, are just as artistically revealing and educationally moving as his larger murals in the traveling exhibition.

As Woodruff noted in the September 21, 1942 issue of *Time Magazine* regarding his study of rural life in Georgia, "We are interested in expressing the South as a field, as a territory, its peculiar rundown landscapes, its social and economic problems, and Negro people."² Although Woodruff was one of the first academically trained African-American art professors to document the public housing conditions of black people in the South during the Jim Crow era, *Time Magazine* mistakenly coined his work in 1942 as "outhouse school of art."³ But Ralph McGill, the anti-segregation columnist and later editor of the *Atlanta Constitution*, wrote a more accurate portrayal of Woodruff's images of black urban life as art that speaks "out in rebuke. They are worth more, they say more than all the studies on economics and the need for slum clearance and for better housing."⁴

The exhibition of Woodruff's historic murals and smaller works will continue to travel the country until 2015. The next viewing of his art will be held May 16 through September 14, 2014 at the New Orleans Museum of Art. I encourage you to take time out and see this transformative exhibition of the murals and smaller works by artist Hale A. Woodruff.

¹ Hale Woodruff Bio, Accessed November 8, 2013.

<http://moyepto.com/programs/GSWA/artists/Woodruff,%20Hale/biography/Hale%20Woodruff%20Bio.pdf>

² Time Magazine, September 21, 1942

³ Time Magazine, September 21, 1942

⁴ Ralph McGill, "Quiet Negro Artist Here Hailed as One of Modern Masters," *Atlanta Constitution*, December 18, 1935; quoted in Heydt, "Rising Up," p. 36.

