

ART REVIEW

In Electric Moments, History Transfigured

By Roberta Smith

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There is nothing in American art quite like the elegant, urgent, boldly colored murals that Hale Woodruff painted between 1938 and 1942 for Talladega College, a historically black institution in Alabama. Clear in hue, form and narrative, these six canvases constitute the heart of “Rising Up: Hale Woodruff’s Murals at Talladega College,” a stunning exhibition at the 80WSE Gallery on the campus of New York University.

This is the first time the murals are being seen in New York, and possibly the last. Precipitated by their removal from Talladega for conservation, the show was organized at the High Museum of Art in Atlanta by Stephanie Mayer Heydt. At the close of a three-year, eight-museum tour, they are to return to Talladega, where they are a revered part of the college’s history.

Crowded with vigorous, brightly attired individuals and spiced with telling details and background scenes, these imposing paintings — two measure 20 feet across — confer an inspiring optimism on different moments from African-American history. Each is a one-act play unto itself.

The strongest of the six are three murals related to the 1839 uprising aboard the Spanish ship Amistad, when a group of West African captives led by Joseph Cinque overwhelmed the crew. The murals depict the mutiny, the trial of the rebels in New Haven and, finally, their repatriation to Africa after their acquittal.

The fourth mural focuses on the Underground Railroad, cast as a panoramic epic of runaway slaves, Northern Abolitionists, plunging vistas and modes of transportation. The remaining two are devoted to the history of Talladega College, founded immediately after the Civil War by two former slaves. One scene is crowded with students, teachers, workmen and the farm animals offered in lieu of tuition; the other depicts an interracial crew’s construction of Savery Library, for whose walls Woodruff painted the murals. The opening of the library in 1939 was timed to the 100th anniversary of the Amistad rebellion.

The Talladega murals teach history by making it visually riveting. The magnetism of the medium makes the message accessible and thrilling. The undeniably powerful impact of form (deliberately deployed color, shape, composition, style) on highly specific subject matter makes this show doubly important; we live in a moment when form, and formalism, are often disparaged as passé diversions, if not downright socially irresponsible. The centrality of form to the strength of these images could not be timelier.

Woodruff's murals may be the greatest to emerge from the American Social Realist and mural movements of the 1930s and '40s. This notion will raise eyebrows among admirers of Thomas Hart Benton, who led those movements and exerted an important influence on Woodruff. But this exhibition suggests that Woodruff supersedes Benton in every way — in visual and narrative force, in his assured synthesis of history and also in his humanity.



Left, “The Building of Savery Library” (1942), by Hale Woodruff, in an installation view of “Rising Up,” at N.Y.U. Emon Hassan for The New York Times

This is the first New York museum exhibition devoted to Woodruff’s art since the Studio Museum in Harlem mounted a small retrospective of his work in 1979, the year before the artist’s death at the age of 80 in Manhattan. While not a retrospective, it has considerable sweep, supplementing the murals with some 40 additional works by Woodruff: smaller paintings, wonderful mural studies and terse linocut prints that date from roughly the same period. The show could have been much larger, but the smaller works give some indication of where Woodruff was as an artist by 1938, when the Talladega commission materialized.

Born in Cairo, Ill., and raised in Nashville, he studied art in Indianapolis and at the Art Institute of Chicago before spending four crucial years (1927-31) in Paris. Hired as an art instructor at a college in Atlanta, he began trying to bend the lessons of European Modernism, especially Post-Impressionism and Cubism, into a socially aware art. A Cubistic painting of an Atlanta shantytown from 1933-34 is one result; a more bucolic but nonetheless charged landscape indebted to van Gogh is another.

In 1936, Woodruff spent time in Mexico, working as an apprentice to Diego Rivera, the leader of the Mexican mural movement, who taught him the basics of fresco painting. Although it was a medium he would never use, its high-keyed colors clearly influenced the palette of the murals. Rivera's influence is also visible in "Night Blooming Cereus," a depiction of two opulent white blooms and a fleshy bud. It suggests a conscientious botanical work by the 19th-century landscape painter Martin Johnson Heade, but as executed by the more emphatic hand of the Modernist Marsden Hartley.

The works make it clear that the Talladega commission spurred a substantial artistic leap in Woodruff's career. Almost overnight, he seems to have gone from being primarily a landscape painter to an artist at ease with large, multifigure compositions that draw inspiration from all over the art historical spectrum, most prominently African art, Cubism, Social Realism and Renaissance painting, as Ms. Heydt explains in her catalog essay.

Woodruff was not familiar with the story of Amistad when he was invited to do the mural, so he traveled to New Haven to study the trial. There he also found an admiring portrait of Cinque by Nathaniel Jocelyn (1796-1881) and fine pencil likenesses of each of the other defendants by William H. Townsend (1822-1851). These contribute to the power of the trial scene, where the captives, layered in shallow space like angels in a Fra Angelico painting, are extremely expressive and individualized. (Woodruff included a self-portrait in the crowd.)

Though working in oil on canvas, Woodruff adopted a high-keyed, white-backed palette like that of Renaissance frescoes by painters like Signorelli and Pontormo. He also persisted in the practice evident in his smaller paintings of making every square inch of canvas contribute actively to the whole. Thus the marvelous array of detail: the wood grain of the schooner, the top hats across the foreground of the trial scene, the parrotlike carpetbag peeking out near the lower left corner of the repatriation mural, the ropelike gingham-covered basket to one side in the Underground Railroad scene.

Nothing from the inanimate world enlivens Woodruff's painting as much as the garments. The artist, who looks quietly natty in photographs, painted many of his figures in bright, often patterned, almost dandyish attire, with soft drapes and folds that catch the light, making it seem as if many of them were clothed in silk. Widespread use is made of windowpane plaids, stripes and especially dotted neckerchiefs. (One is worn by the most raggedly dressed figure in the murals, the young man seated, ready to register for school, in "Opening Day.")

The runaway slave who kneels like one of the Magi at the center of "The Underground Railroad" wears a shirt of green-on-green polka dots. A handsome man in pinstriped red trousers, a phthalate blue waistcoat and a lime-green vest, gracefully posed like one of Pontormo's princes, welcomes new students in "Opening Day at Talladega College." He echoes the near-center position and presence of the regal, well-turned-out figure of Cinque in "The Trial of the Amistad Captives" and, especially, "The Repatriation." Some of these garments have the starchy look-at-me presence of clothing in limner folk-art portraits from the early 19th century.

In their easy drapes and swirling folds, these garments add visual intensity to the actors in these dramas; moreover, they hint at the bodies beneath them and the complex souls within. They are part of the indomitable optimism that is the glory — and the content — of Woodruff's great murals.