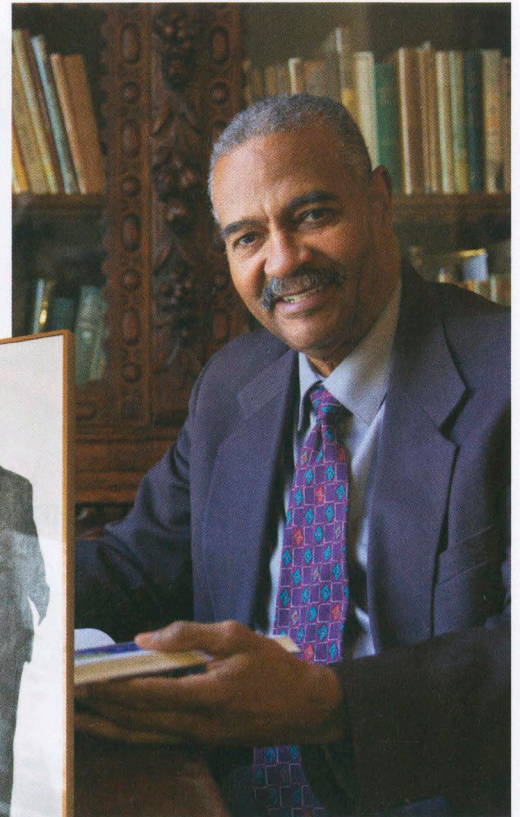


An Eye for American Art

A Savannah surgeon focuses on African-American artists who were once ignored

BY JUDITH H. DOBRZYNSKI

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From left An embroiderer stitching in *Victory Garden* (1943) by self-taught artist Horace Pippin (1888–1946), who once said, “I paint it exactly the way I see it.” A life-size portrait of Walter O. Evans by Pulitzer Prize-winning cartoonist Pat Oliphant. Evans at his home in Savannah, where he and his wife, Linda, live surrounded by museum-caliber art.

Many years ago, when Walter O. Evans served in the Navy, he met a young lady at a party and asked her out on a date. She suggested a visit to the Philadelphia Museum of Art. “I’d never been to an art museum before,” says Evans, now a retired general surgeon. “So I went to the library and read about the artists we’d see. And I told her about Monet, and how he had gone blind late in life, and Degas, who had lived in New Orleans.”

Although the girl was duly impressed, the relationship didn’t last long. But the infatuation with art that she sparked turned into a deep and loving commitment for Evans. He kept going to museums, stirred by what he saw, except for one thing: their lack of art by African-Americans. Not too much later, after he earned his medical

degree and began practicing in Detroit, Evans stepped into the breach. In 1978, when the Detroit Institute of Art published a portfolio of 22 silk-screen prints by Jacob Lawrence called *The Legend of John Brown*, Evans bought the complete set.

Before long, he caught the collecting bug, with what was at the time an unusual focus. “Dr. Walter Evans is absolutely one of the pioneer collectors of African-American art,” says New York art dealer Michael Rosenfeld, who has long specialized in the field. “And he has collected in an encyclopedic manner, spanning the 19th and 20th centuries.”

Evans now owns works by virtually every important black artist up to and including Modernism icons Romare Bearden, Elizabeth Catlett, Archibald Motley, Robert Scott Duncanson, Mary Edmonia Lewis, Henry

Tanner, Beauford Delaney, Alma Thomas, Norman Lewis, Benny Andrews, and Aaron Douglas. His 2005 gift of more than 60 artworks to the Savannah College of Art and Design barely put a dent in his trove, which numbers in the hundreds.

Evans’s quest was no name game, though. “He followed his heart and collected high-caliber works,” Rosenfeld says. Nigel Freeman, the founder of the African-American Fine Art department at Swann Auction Galleries, says, “He sought out major pieces by all the major artists” and now has “a world-class, museum-quality collection.” Evans also possesses thousands of historical manuscripts and first-edition books by African-Americans. By all accounts, he is one of the most important collectors of African-American works in the country. ➤