



The French Collection Part 2: #11, Le Café des Artistes

1991

Acrylic on canvas with pieced fabric border

79.5 inches by 90 inches

(201.93 centimeters by 228.6 centimeters)

Front row, left to right: William H Johnson, Archibald Motley, Willia Marie Simone, Elizabeth Catlett, Lois Mailou Jones, Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller, Edmonia Lewis, Faith Ringgold

Middle row, left to right: Sargent Johnson, Romare Bearden, Aaron Douglas, Henry O Tanner, Paul Gauguin, Vincent van Gogh, Augusta Savage

Back row, left to right: Ed Clark, Raymond Saunders, Jacob Lawrence, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, Maurice Utrillo

1. Dear Aunt Melissa

Me

Pierre left as the owner of a Paris café, Le Café des Artistes, le rendezvous des arts et des lettres. It is located on the Boulevard des Saint Germain des Pres across from church in the heart of the artist's quartier.

2. I am here every day now. We are a very popular café. Every Saturday nite we have le dancing le plus gai et le plus curieueux de Paris. Today the tables are humming with the usual clientele of artists and writers nursing a café crème and making art history right before our eyes.

3. Pierre would be proud of my associations with the artists and writers. But still I have mixed feelings. Sometimes I feel as though I am one of them; at other times I feel like “The Spook That Sat By the Door.” I feel that now I have words to say that simply will not wait.

4. Today I will issue the colored woman’s manifesto of Art and Politics. What would Pierre have to say about that? His timid wife all of 20 years old and addressing the greatest artists and writers of the century. I doubt that I would be doing this if Pierre were alive. But he is not and I am.

5. Madames and monsieurs, I said, may I have your attention? This is a momentous time in the history of modern art, and I am excited to be in Paris, the center of cultural change and exchange. “It is a pleasure to have one so beautiful among us Madame Willia Marie. Bon chere noire.”

6. Like the symbolists, Dadaists, surrealists, and cubists, I have a proclamation to make for which I beg your indulgence. It is the Colored Woman’s Manifesto of Art and Politics. “Women should stay home and make children not art.” “Soulard, alcoolique. You should go home!” “Silence! Taisez-vous!”

7. I am an international colored woman. My African ancestry dates back to the beginnings of human origins, 9 million years ago in Ethiopia. The art and culture of Africa has been stolen by Western Europeans and my people have been colonized, enslaved, and forgotten.

8. What is very old has become new. And what was black has become white. “We wear the mask” but it has a new use as

cubist art. “But you are influenced by the French Impressionists.” “No the German Expressionists.” Modern art is not yours or mine. It is ours.

9. There is as much of the African masks of my ancestors as there is of the Greek statuary of yours in the art of modern times. “No it is the Fauve that has influenced you Madame Willia Marie.” And who made the first art... a doll maybe for an unborn child? A woman of course.

10. “You are a primitive but very pretty.” Paris artists are shaping the culture of the world with their ideas. But modern art is much bigger than Western Europe or Paris. I am here, (in Paris). I am there (in Africa) too. That is why I am issuing a Colored Woman’s Manifesto of Art and Politics.

11. “You should learn French cooking, it will help you to blend your couleurs.” “No she is a natural with couleur. Very primitive.” I will call a Congress of African American Women artists to Paris to propose that two issues be discussed. What is the image of the Colored Woman in art? And what is our purpose as modern artists.

12. No important change of a modernist nature can go on without the colored woman. “Her palette is too harsh she needs to develop a subtle range of greys.” Today I became a woman with ideas of my own. Ideas are my freedom. And freedom is why I became an artist.

13. The important thing for the colored woman to remember is we must speak, or our ideas and ourselves will remain unheard and unknown. The café is my academie, my gallery, my home. The artists and writers are my teachers, and my friends. But Africa is my art, my classical form and inspiration.

14. “You will come to my studio Madame Willia Marie. I will show you how to make a rich palette of couleurs and teach you to paint like a master.” “But next you will model for me my African

maiden. Earth Mama! Queen of the Nile!” C’est la vie Auntie. The price I pay for being an artist.

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