

ONE-TWO PUNCHINELLO

THIS SUMMER, ROBERT COLESCOTT TAKES HIS IRREVERENCE TO ITALY, WHERE HE WILL REPRESENT THE UNITED STATES AT THE VENICE BIENNALE. IN HIS PAINTINGS FEATURING IMAGES OF AUNT JEMIMA, TAP-DANCING BLACKS, AND BLONDE BOMBSHELLS, COLESCOTT MAKES SERIOUS POINTS WITH A DEFT USE OF HUMOR

BY SALLY EAUCLAIRE

"I never sought fame," Robert Colescott says quietly. "I just wanted to paint. I wanted to earn enough by my painting to support my painting, and the only way to do that was to build a reputation." At this year's Venice Biennale, Colescott becomes the first African American artist ever to represent the United States in a solo turn, and the first painter to do so since Jasper Johns in 1988. No one is more surprised than the 71-year-old artist himself.

Colescott crafts paintings that are literally and figuratively multilayered. He once compared his artistic approach to the "one-two punch." He hooks the viewer with comfortably familiar, sometimes laughably altered images of Aunt Jemima, Stepin Fetchit, tap-dancing blacks, blonde "bomshells," "hot tamales," and other stereotypes, then adds the twists and turns of his own subplots and counterplots. They add up to a solid punch that leaves viewers reeling—and wondering whether they should laugh or cry.

If the characters appear grotesque, it's because they represent the gross distortions of history. If forms advance and recede according to the laws of color theory and the dictates of modernist art, this is an implicit comment on cultural progression and regression. Most important, Colescott chooses cacophonous colors, crazy-quilt patterns, and centripetal and centrifugal compositions that keep ideas buzzing in viewers' faces.

The artist's goal is to get people thinking about the subtle, as well as the blatant, dimensions of racial and sexual stereotyping, economic exploitation, and religious indoctrination. He



would like us to turn a critical eye on received history—including the predominantly white male field of art history. Though Colescott won't say whether the unobtrusive but alert black cats that turn up in many of his canvases are, in fact, self-portraits, their claws—sharp, threatening daggers sheathed in fur—seem an appropriate metaphor for his loaded paintings.

Chosen in a competition for the Biennale last June, Colescott will exhibit 19 of his large, biting acrylic paintings from the past decade. The selection was made by freelance curator Mimi Roberts, who organized a show of Colescott's work for the San Jose Museum of Art in 1987. The current exhibition—which opens in Venice the 11th of this month and runs through November 14—will travel to Queens, New York; Tucson; Portland, Oregon; Berkeley; and Santa Fe, where it will appear at SITE Santa

Fe, its sponsoring organization.

Colescott has longstanding ties to Santa Fe, largely through Arlene LewAllen, his dealer there and a partner in Cline LewAllen Contemporary, where he will show new works through June 21. The prolific artist also shows with Phyllis Kind in New York (he is scheduled to exhibit new paintings there next spring) and Howard Yezerski in Boston (where he will exhibit in January).



"Self-censorship is a cop-out," says Robert Colescott (facing page). His pictures often leave the viewer reeling—and wondering whether to laugh or cry. TOP: *The Bilingual Cop*, 1995; LEFT: *I Gets a Thrill Too When I Sees De Koo*, 1978; ABOVE: *George Washington Carver Crossing the Delaware*: Page from an American History Textbook, 1975.

The invitation to show in Venice would have been inconceivable to Colescott's father, a talented classical and jazz violinist whose best career option as a black man was waiting tables on a train for the Southern Pacific Railroad. Wanting more for his son, he encouraged higher education and a profession—something like law, perhaps. Young Colescott chose art instead, inspired in part by Sargent Johnson, a black sculptor who worked with the senior Colescott on the railroad. Today, the artist still speaks of the impact of Johnson's work ethic as well as the disappointment and frustration he sensed in both Johnson and his father.

Their plight prodded him to seek a different fate. Raised in Oakland, he enrolled at the University of California at Berkeley, where he earned a bachelor's degree in painting and drawing in 1949 and a master's in the same disciplines in 1952. In the intervening period, from 1949 to 1950, he studied in Paris with Fernand Léger. He was determined to join a new generation of professional and cosmopolitan African American artists.

Other than a stint selling art supplies in New York City, Colescott has made his living teaching art, beginning with seventh-grade classes and moving on, as his reputation grew, to prestigious visiting professorships and other university positions. Although he retired last year as the Regents' Professor of Art at the University of Arizona at Tucson, where he now lives, Colescott still travels frequently to give lectures and workshops. During the many years spent teaching, he also painted, often from eight in the evening until three in the morning. "I had to," he says. "I'd been to Paris. I'd studied painting. I'd had those opportunities.

It was time to prove to myself I was a painter."

Though proud of his academic credentials—and acutely aware that they would not have been as available had he been born a generation earlier—Colescott is deeply inspired by popular culture. "We kids talked every day about the comic strips," he says of his years growing up during the Depression. "I drew [the comic characters] Toots and Caspar all the time." Saturdays he spent at the movie theater, watching Westerns in which, he says, "men were men and women were women." Variations on that theme have surfaced in recent years in his satirical paintings about sexism, domestic bondage, and racial and gender power games.

Ambitious as he was for his painting, Colescott declined to join the many serious artists of the 1940s and '50s who succumbed to the lure of abstraction. He accepted the expressionist component of Abstract Expressionism but not the abstract part. Léger encouraged him in the view—determined in the Frenchman's case largely by Communist sympathies—that abstraction was an art alienated from the people.

Colescott agreed for the most part, yet he wondered if there was a place for him as a practitioner of realist or figurative art, given the record of nearly all-white subject matter in these art fields. Picasso's uses of African and primitive art fascinated him—and still do—but they seem to Colescott as much imperi-

alist appropriations as respectful borrowings. "Ironically, what most of us—that, of course, includes me—know about African art comes from Cubist art," he says.

In the mid-1970s, Colescott had his first taste of fame. Critical attention—if not always acclaim—came with his parodies of masterpieces, seen in such group exhibitions as the Whitney Museum's 1978 "Art about Art." Colescott's pictorial gags, which involved substituting black characters for the familiar white ones, were instantly appealing to art lovers who "got the joke." Colescott's real message, however, went deeper.

Perhaps the best known of the paintings of that period is *Eat dem Taters* (1975), in which Colescott replaced the downtrodden peasants of Vincent van Gogh's *Potato Eaters* with a band of merry minstrel singers thrilled at the very prospect of eating potatoes for supper. "I was attacking the myth of the 'happy darkie,'" the artist explains. "It's been all too convenient for white people to believe that black people can sing, laugh, dance, and be happy even in the most dire circumstances."

In *George Washington Carver Crossing the Delaware* (1975), Colescott revamped Emanuel Leutze's famous painting, substituting the slave-turned-agricultural chemist Carver for the original George Washington and providing him with a crew of banjo-playing blacks and others reeling in catfish.

"Subverting this icon seemed good, clean fun," says the artist. "But it's serious, too. I saw the need to critique an educational system that has consistently ignored black contributions. When I was growing up, there were only two black heroes: Booker T. Wash-

ington and George Washington Carver. The menial workers—the boot blacks, mammies, and Stepin Fetchits—however, were very well known to me."

Often Colescott's substitutions raised the question "What if?" What if the pregnant woman in Jan van Eyck's *Arnolfini Wedding* were black? How would we respond? What if one of Willem de Kooning's raging women were Aunt Jemima, as she appears in *I Gets a Thrill Too When I Sees De Koo* (1978)?

Although Colescott was one of the first to take up the borrowing and parodying now known as "appropriation," his form of irony burned, setting it apart from the cool irony more typical of mainstream postmodernism. "I didn't have a name for it [appropriation] then," says the artist. "Of course I knew the tradition of artists doing homages to previous masterpieces." His own work, though always irreverent, is often affectionate, as well.

By the time "appropriation" had become an art-world buzzword, Colescott had moved on. He had made his point about the limits of art history, and he had tired of viewers who thought he had little to offer beyond a trick or a punch line. Of the layers that many viewers missed, Colescott says, "I was ridiculing the meanness and silliness of images in art that were white inventions, not ours. I was also trying to tell people how blacks would have been portrayed in the art history at that time had they been portrayed at all. The very prejudice that kept blacks



ABOVE *Triumph of Christianity*, 1993. **LEFT** *Between Two Worlds*, 1992. Though he is proud of his academic credentials, Colescott has been deeply inspired by popular culture.

out of the dominant culture created the Sambo image."

Since the mid-1980s, Colescott's work has become richer, more varied and technically fluent, and less easy to pigeonhole than before. Although he continues to borrow and adapt stereotypes as a way of critiquing them, his subject matter has ranged widely, and little escapes his scrutiny. Thus, in *The Bilingual Cop* (1995), a policeman expresses his bigotry in both English and Spanish; in *School Days* (1988), colleges recruit black athletes and white scholars; in *The Star: A View from the Pinnacle* (1987), wealthy whites appear to own black celebrities; and in *Holmes in the U.S.A.* (1994), an opium-addicted Sherlock Holmes orders a needle from his black toady, Dr. Watson.

Clichés and visual puns proliferate. In *A Visit from Uncle Charlie* (1995), a "buck"-naked black man wearing white bucks stands front and center—playing havoc with distasteful, if somewhat dated, racial slurs and symbols. A visual plethora of clichéd sayings radiate from the central figure, including a "cat out of the bag," "a skeleton in the closet," "shit hitting the fan," and "a snow job." They refer to the no-longer-hidden presence of a black man as a member of a "pedigreed" white family, seen shrinking in the background.

Increasingly, Colescott's paintings include figures of indeterminate race. Works with biracial mutations that out-Picasso Picasso feature twisting pileups of different-shaped noses, blue and brown eyes, and kinky and smooth hair. Who's who, who's what, and whether it matters are questions that appear to haunt the artist. In his paintings, he explores the issues raised by the



many variations of so-called "black" skin that appear in them. *Between Two Worlds* (1992), though, shows women of color—even angels of color—looking to blond, blue-eyed ideals. "I paint these things to come to terms with them," he says.

In the 1990s Colescott began tackling the notion of "the dark side." He asks, "Why is it that so many of us think that something dark represents evil?" Why, he badgers, in such paintings as his *Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1991), do viewers seem to react to the black Quasimodo as a rapist and not a savior. Colescott continually raises the specters of forbidden sexuality, wildness, anger, transformation, and death—believing, perhaps, that we all would be psychologically healthier if we could acknowledge and assimilate the so-called dark sides of ourselves. "I've never felt boundaries or limits to what I might do," he says. "Self-censorship is a cop-out."

He is both proud of and bemused by the Biennale honor. "Fame," he says "does not necessarily have to do with accomplishment. It can have plenty to do with conduct, appearance, or the ability to draw the curious." He anticipates some controversy, saying that he will play "cat and mouse" with interviewers regarding the autobiographical nature of his work and that he will patiently endure the usual inquiries about black art and history.

These inquiries usually include the following: How does he compare his work with that of African American artists who preceded him, such as Romare Bearden and Jacob Lawrence? "Well, I'm not as easy to pin down as those two and, hopefully, I'm a lot more adventurous than that!" Why doesn't he paint

cruel slave masters and suffering black slaves? "You can say those images are out of date! That type of stereotype created an artistic ghetto. Black artists were expected to do a certain kind of work and show only in February [Black History Month]."

Though it seems self-evident, Colescott has to keep explaining that African American artists can also do what white artists have always taken for granted—deal with complex contemporary issues and push the outer limits of style, taste, and rationality. It's a rare questioner who doesn't ask whether it's fitting to laugh at the images. "It's okay to laugh," he says emphatically. "We laugh with Dick Gregory in stereotypical roles. We laugh at Cleavon Little. What I'm trying to say about these stereotypes gives them new significance."

After 50 years of painting and 30 years of exhibiting widely, Colescott has little doubt that most viewers will catch his one-two punch. What he wonders now is whether future generations will see more than just the content in his work. "Will the time ever come," he asks, "when these paintings stand on their own, grab people, surprise them, and move them with their formal structures and rhythms?"

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