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From Mutiny to Harmony

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In 1938, the African-American painter Hale Woodruff was commissioned to execute murals for a new library at Alabama’s Talladega College, one of this country’s first all-black colleges (founded in 1867). Woodruff produced six monumental canvases about wide-ranging aspects of black history, all packed with agile, generously scaled figures rendered with sinuous drawing and luminous color. The first three paintings, completed in 1939, deal with the Amistad mutiny and its aftermath as emblems of heroic African protest against slavery and New Englanders’ support of the rebellious slaves’ cause; the second trio, completed in 1942, celebrates the opening of Talladega College and the construction of the library itself as paradigms of black Americans’ progress since the Civil War.

Rising Up:

Hale Woodruff’s Murals From Talladega College

High Museum of Art

Through Sept. 2

The Talladega murals, which initially attracted wide attention, may be Woodruff’s most accomplished works, yet despite their visual strength and narrative power, they have been little known during the nearly seven decades since their installation in the lobby of the college library. Now, for the first time, the murals will reach a far wider audience. After a year of conservation that fully revealed their rich, varied palette, the six paintings are the center of an informative survey, “Rising Up: Hale Woodruff’s Murals at Talladega College,” organized by Stephanie Heydt of the High Museum of Art, Atlanta, in collaboration with the college.
"Rising Up" will be at the High through Sept. 2, 2012, after which it will travel to the 80WSE Gallery at New York University, the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American Culture and History in Washington, and four other museums.

Woodruff was 38 when he received the Talladega commission. (Born in 1900 in Ohio, and raised in Tennessee, he died in 1980 in New York, where he taught at New York University for more than 20 years.) After studying at the John Herron Art Institute, Indianapolis, Woodruff broadened his experience at the Art Institute of Chicago's school, Harvard's Fogg Museum School, and in Paris between 1927 and 1931. "Rising Up" first introduces us to the gifted young painter in Paris, experimenting with a variety of modernist painting languages. The early works suggest an awareness of Paul Cézanne, Maurice Utrillo, Chaim Soutine and Cubist fractured space, none of these radical at the time but all different from what Woodruff had already mastered.

Little is known about what the ambitious young painter saw in Paris, apart from his visiting the doyen of African-American artists, the expatriate symbolist Henry Ossawa Tanner, and beginning to collect African art. Works made after Woodruff's 1931 return to the U.S. (to head Atlanta University's newly established art department) seem to back away from modernism. The Depression, it appears, provoked him to explicit images of the grittier aspects of African-American life, including bold woodcuts (a populist medium) evoking conditions in the Jim Crow South. A summer in Mexico, studying with the most acclaimed populist artist of all, Diego Rivera, in 1936, alerted Woodruff to the difference between embodying narrative and illustration—an awareness he clearly demonstrated in his many future mural commissions, including the Talladega project.

The Amistad uprising, a story of triumphant resistance, was a daring choice of subject given the fierce racial tensions of the 1930s. In 1839, 53 African-born slaves on a ship bound from one Cuban sugar plantation to another attacked their captors, killing all but two, spared to help them sail back to Africa. Arrested off the New England coast and tried in Connecticut, the mutineers were acquitted and, helped by American abolitionist missionaries, returned to Africa. (Some of those missionaries helped to found Talladega College, hence the murals' iconography.)

Woodruff's brilliantly conceived first painting, "The Mutiny on the Amistad," is a marvel of glistening dark bodies; abject Cuban victims; intricate patterns of rope, cane bundles and basketry; and acutely individualized characters based on contemporary drawings of the mutineers. The leader, Cinqué, confronts us, a dignified, handsome, vital presence, off to the left; a fellow rebel, with elegant, aquiline features, brandishes a machete, downstage center. The vigorously rendered musculature and shifting color suggest the Mexican muralist José Clemente Orozco—whom Woodruff admired; several figures are informed by Théodore Géricault's "Raft of the Medusa" (1818-19); the energy and passion are Woodruff's own.

Repeated visual clues allow us to follow the story in the images of the trial and the Africans' repatriation. We recognize specific individuals, including Woodruff himself, among the abolitionist supporters of the Africans, but larger pictorial issues—slashing diagonals, arabesque rhythms, carefully orchestrated groupings, spatial shifts—knit the three enormous paintings together and subsume the narrative. Similar inventiveness distinguishes the "racial harmony" panels: "The Underground Railroad" (white men helping runaway slaves to escape), "Opening Day at Talladega College" (newly freed slaves bartering animals and produce for tuition) and "The Building of Savery Library" (blacks and whites laboring together). Given the racial climate of the times, an era of lynchings and horrors such as the Scottsboro Boys' trial, Woodruff's images must be read as aspiring to an ideal future.

"Rising Up" concludes with proposals for later murals. One cycle, realized for Atlanta University, stresses the importance of African art; another, based on Woodruff's 1943, grant-sponsored tour of the South, recording the often deplorable living conditions of African-Americans, contrasts "the effects" of poor and good housing—art as social activism with no aesthetic compromise. The Talladega murals are the deserved stars of "Rising Up," but the show as a whole affirms Woodruff's place among America's pre-eminent social realists of the 1930s and early 1940s.

Ms. Wilkin writes about art for the Journal.