

Westbury Arts Honors the Memory of  
James A. Porter  
1905 – 1970  
Artist, Historian, Curator, and Educator

COMPILED BY STANLEY TURETSKY



James Amos Porter, *"Self-Portrait"*  
*National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution.*  
*gift of Dorothy Porter Wesley*

The world, and in particular African American artists, could have lost the man who became the "Father of African American art history."



James A. Porter, circa 1930 -  
Harmon Foundation Photo

James A. Porter's father, the Reverend John Porter, had great expectations that his son would follow in his footsteps after high school and become a minister in the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) church. The Reverend Porter introduced young James to the head of Howard University's art department, James V. Herring, in the hope that Herring could discourage James from becoming an artist. Fortunately, Herring not only recognized Porter's talent, but also encouraged him to continue making art, and urged him to attend Howard after graduation.

Born in Baltimore, Maryland in 1905, James was the youngest of eight children. After an introduction to painting from his older brother, John Jr., he developed a love for art which set the direction for the rest of his life. Graduating at the top of his high school class, Porter was awarded a scholarship to Yale. However,

due to the costs associated with living that far from home, he instead accepted a scholarship to Howard University which was in Washington, D.C. where his family resided. While at Howard, Porter studied painting, drawing, and art history and, upon graduation in 1926, was offered a position as an instructor which he accepted.

In preparation for his new role as a teacher, Porter spent the summer studying pedagogy at Columbia University's Teachers College in New York City. It was at this time that he became aware of the lack of information available regarding black artists. After reading a brief article about the 19<sup>th</sup> century African American landscape painter Robert S. Duncanson, he wanted to learn more, but found no material to study. Duncanson was the most accomplished African American painter in the United States from 1850 to 1860.



James A. Porter,  
*"The Piggy Bank"* Charcoal  
on paper, 1944

***"Duncanson has long enjoyed the enviable reputation of being the best landscape painter in the West, and his latest effort cannot fail to raise him still higher."***

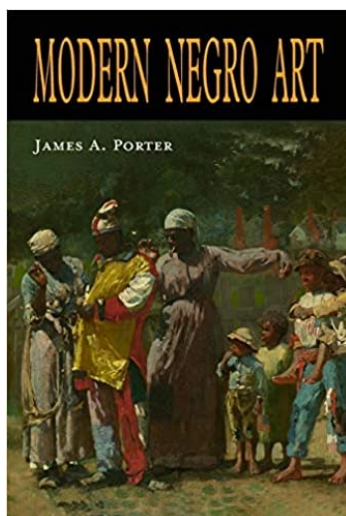
Yet, somehow, by the turn of the century he was all but forgotten."

- Daily Cincinnati Gazette



Robert S. Duncanson, *"Landscape with Rainbow,"* 1859, oil on canvas,  
Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Leonard and Paula Granoff.  
It is on loan to the White House since the Biden Inauguration.

This was an era when the contributions of African American artists were denied. James Porter was persistent in defining the image of black artists worldwide. His 1943 publication *Modern Negro Art* which grew out of his master's thesis, is the earliest comprehensive treatment of the contribution of artists of African descent to American art and culture.



His examination of black art places it, correctly, as a part of American culture, while also linking it to the African diaspora. Porter's research and writing established the curriculum for African American art and provided a foundation for the study of black artists which is in use to this day.

***"Modern Negro Art" is still an indispensable reference work 50 years after its initial publication. Yet another generation of scholars will benefit from its keen insights into the early evolution of African Americans in the visual arts, and its astounding bibliographic compilation."***

- Lowry S. Sims, Metropolitan Museum of Art.

***"Modern Negro Art" 1943.  
Reprinted Edition 2020***

Porter's research for *Modern Negro Art* led him to the Harlem branch of the New York Public Library. His research at the library, with the assistance of research librarian Dorothy Burnett helped him uncover important and long forgotten material. Ms. Burnett specialized in "Negro writings before 1835" and would prove to be essential in Porter's professional and personal life. She was the first African American woman to obtain a Masters degree from Columbia University in library science. Working together, with shared common interests and matching intellects, they soon fell in love and in 1929, both 24 years of age, they married. Their daughter, Constance, was born in 1939. They remained professional as well as personal partners with Dorothy working closely alongside James providing him with bibliographies and aiding him in his research.

They left New York to begin what was to be an almost 40-year career at Howard University, James as an instructor in Art Department and Dorothy as a librarian. James became the chairperson of the Art Department upon James Herring's retirement in 1953 and served as director of the Art Gallery as well. Dorothy became the director of the Moorland-Spingarn Research Center (MSRC) at Howard. The MSRC is recognized as one of the world's largest and most comprehensive repositories for the documentation of the history and culture of people of African descent in Africa, the Americas, and other parts of the world.

James Porter's impact on African American art history was matched by his influence on young African American artists. Often described as a gifted and inspiring teacher, he was a mentor and



**Dorothy Wesley Porter,  
taken by Carl Van Vechten,  
May 1951. From Yale  
Collection of American  
Literature, Beinecke Rare  
Book, and Manuscript  
Library.**



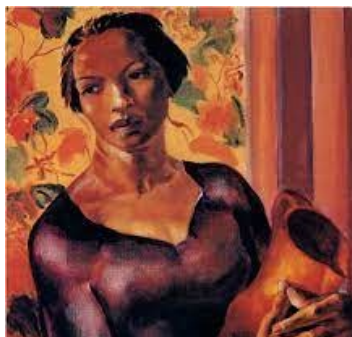
role model to many of his students, included among them was David C. Driskell, who is cited as one of the world's leading authorities on African American Art.

***“Just as many art historians prefer the dust of library stacks to the colorful mess of the studio, while many artists choose to remain ignorant of the artistic past that has, without their knowledge, shaped their work. James A. Porter, however, relished the challenges and pleasures of both pursuits. As an instructor at Howard University for over 40 years, Porter’s pioneering research into the work of early African American artists rescued a great deal of important art from obscurity. At the same time, he worked with and inspired some of the 20th century’s most successful Black artists.”- Washington Post, November 27, 1992, p. B2. —Robert R. Jacobson***



**Howard University, the Founders Library. \_**

As if his achievements as teacher and art historian were not enough, James Porter was also a



**James A. Porter, “Woman Holding a Jug,” 1932**

renowned painter in his own right, remaining active as an artist throughout his distinguished academic care. He was a sensitive draftsman as evidenced by the charcoal drawings from his early sketchbooks. He also excelled in the areas of portrait painting, figure studies, and still life, however, his most successful works were oil portraits of family and friends. In 1932, at the age of twenty-seven, his painting *Woman Holding a Jug* was the recipient of the Schomburg Portrait Prize from the Harmon Foundation. In 1966, President Lyndon B. Johnson, on the twenty-fifth anniversary of the founding of the National Gallery of Art, honored Porter as “one of America’s most outstanding men of the arts.”

Porter’s research took him to countries around the world, including Cuba, Haiti, South Africa, Egypt, West Africa, as well as Europe. His travels and research stimulated the creation of several new courses at Howard including "Latin American Art" and "African Art and Architecture." These trips also influenced his paintings. His artwork matured and became more expressionistic with African themes. He sought to *"capture the rhythmic accents of African life, the changeful moods of color and atmosphere..."* Porter said, *"You can't help painting when you're in Africa—the skies, the red earth, the verdure and the dress of the people—all of them reinforce one's feeling for color."*

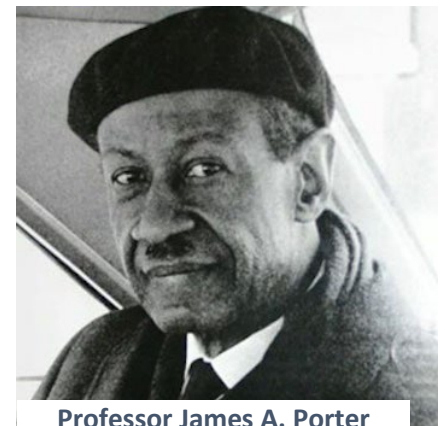


*"Street of the Market, Zaria" (1964) by James A. Porter.*

Photo courtesy of the Delaware Art Museum

Among the museums that have exhibited Porter's artworks are the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Corcoran Gallery of Art, the Detroit Institute of Art, the Museum of Modern Art in New York, Baltimore Museum of Art, as well as museums in Europe, the Caribbean, and Africa. His work was also included in such exhibitions as *The Negro Artist Comes of Age*, *The Negro in American Art*, and *Two Centuries of Black American Art: 1750-1950*.

Porter was diagnosed with cancer towards the end of the 1960s and became gravely ill. He traveled to Rhodesia, nevertheless, to chair a conference on Zimbabwean culture and, in 1970, one week before his death, he chaired a conference on African American artists. Porter died on February 28, 1970, in Washington, D.C. at the age of sixty-five. His second book, *The Black Artist*, was never completed.



Professor James A. Porter

James Amos Porter's legacy remains strong and vibrant to this day. In 1990 Howard University founded an academic colloquium named in Porter's honor and has since held it annually. The Colloquium annually draws leading and emerging scholars in the field of study he helped establish. This year, the 31st Annual James A. Porter Colloquium was held in April around the topic, *"Defining Diaspora: 21st Century Developments in Art of the African Diaspora."* You can view some of the conversations here: <https://art.howard.edu/porter-colloquium/artist-conversations>.

A massive collection of Porter's papers now resides at Emory University Library. (<https://findingaids.library.emory.edu/documents/porter1139/?keywords=James+A.+Porter>) These include correspondence, personal papers, artwork, writings, Howard University files, artist and subject files collected by Porter, photographs, and audiovisual material, as well as some papers of wife Dorothy Porter Wesley and daughter Constance Porter Uzelac.



*"Fish Vendors on Bar Beach," Lagos, 1964, oil on canvas*

Romare Bearden and Harry Henderson in their book, *"A History of African American Artists"* (1993), said of James Porter,

*"Despite his teaching, historical research, and administrative duties as head of the Howard University art department, Porter never stopped painting, mounting many one-man shows, and executing numerous portraits, an art form that lent itself to his specific talents. His paintings tended to be elegantly realistic, detached, and academic until near the end of his life when, after a year-long visit to Africa, they became more expressionistic."*

*"No comparable figure exists among American artists. Most art historians have never seriously used a brush, and most artists tend to be unaware of the social forces behind historical shifts in art."*

## TO LEARN MORE

### Books

Bearden, Romare and Harry Henderson. *A History of African American Artists from 1792 to the Present*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1993.

*James A. Porter: Artist and Art Historian: The Memory of the Legacy*. Washington, D.C.: Howard University Gallery of Art, 1993.

Core Collection Porter, *James A. Modern Negro Art*. Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1992.

### Internet

"James A. Porter: December 22, 1905-February 28, 1970," DC Library by *Beth Anne Meyer Librarian, Art Division* <http://dclibrarylabs.org/blkren/bios/porterja.html>

National Gallery of Art, James A. Porter Colloquium, <https://www.nga.gov/research/casva/meetings/porter-colloquium.html>

"James A. Porter: The Father of African American Art History," January 20, 2015 <https://thelyfe.wordpress.com/2015/01/20/james-a-porter-the-father-of-african-american-art-history/>

**"James Amos Porter (1905-1970)," OCTOBER 8, 2018, BY Karanjot Gill**  
<https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/porter-james-amos-1905-1970/>

**"James Amos Porter, American (1905-1970)," RoGallery.**  
<https://rogallery.com/artists/james-amos-porter/>