Birmingham Museum of Art Welcomes Home Monumental Talladega Murals

The Birmingham Museum of Art presents an acclaimed exhibition of historic murals by renowned African American artist Hale Woodruff. Rising Up: Hale Woodruff's Murals at Talladega College has toured the United States for the past three years and will be on display in Birmingham from June 13 to September 6, 2015.

Organized by the High Museum of Art, Atlanta, in collaboration with Talladega College in Alabama, the exhibition features six large-scale murals – two are 20 feet wide – depicting landmark events in the rise of blacks from slavery to freedom. Commissioned in 1938, to both commemorate the 1867 founding of Talladega College and celebrate its success as one of the nation’s first all-black colleges, the murals had been on continuous view at the college since their installation in the lobby of Savery Library in 1939 and 1942. In 2011, the High Museum of Art and Talladega College began an initiative to research, conserve, and tour the murals nationally for the first time.

“We are happy to welcome home to Alabama Hale Woodruff's revered mural series for Talladega College. The exhibition not only represents what is arguably the strongest work of one of the greatest muralists in American art, but also offers a riveting visual history of important events in the struggle for freedom and equality. Visitors are sure to be captivated by the intensity of Woodruff's color, form, and narrative, which is at once deeply compelling and highly accessible. Roberta Smith of the New York Times perhaps said it best when she declared that, 'Each is a one act play unto itself.'” says Graham C. Boettcher, Chief Curator and William Cary Hulsey Curator of American Art at the Birmingham Museum of Art.

Arranged in two sets of three, the murals vibrantly illustrate heroic efforts to resist slavery as well as significant moments in the history of Talladega College, which opened in 1867 to serve the educational needs of a new population of freed slaves.

The first set of murals features The Mutiny On The Amistad, depicting the uprising on the West African slave ship La Amistad; The Trial of the Amistad Captives, detailing the court proceedings
that followed the mutiny; and The Repatriation of the Freed Captives, portraying their subsequent freedom and return to Africa. The companion murals—The Underground Railroad, The Building of Savery Library and Opening Day at Talladega College—deal with the passage to freedom for slaves prior to the Civil War, and the educational opportunities afforded to freed slaves with the founding of Talladega College.

Additionally, Rising Up explores Woodruff’s impact on the arts and opportunities he provided for artists of color in his role as the first chair of the newly established art department of Atlanta University (now Clark Atlanta University). To that end, the exhibition includes 24 supplemental works, which span Woodruff’s lengthy career, such as studies of the Talladega murals, smaller-scale paintings, and linocut prints. Two works from the Birmingham Museum of Art’s permanent collection will also be on display.

The exhibition is accompanied by a catalogue, which includes essays on the artist, the murals, Talladega College, and American mural painting in the decades surrounding the Talladega project. A descriptive photo essay on the findings of the conservation work is featured. After the tour concludes, the murals will return to Talladega College.

“During my tenure at Talladega College, I have met many individuals who care deeply about these great works of art and are dedicated to their preservation. We are proud to make possible the conservation of these murals through this exhibition, and it is a real pleasure to share our treasures,” said Billy C. Hawkins, Ph.D., President of Talladega College.

Rising Up: Hale Woodruff’s Murals at Talladega College is organized by the High Museum of Art, Atlanta, in collaboration with Talladega College, Talladega, Alabama. The exhibition is presented locally by Protective Life Corporation and Regions Bank with support from the City of Birmingham and McDonald’s of Central Alabama.

Hale Aspacio Woodruff

Hale Aspacio Woodruff (1900–1980) was born in Cairo, Ill. He studied art at both the John Herron Art Institute in Indianapolis and the Fogg Museum of Harvard University. Woodruff contributed to the development of African American art, not only as an artist, but also as a distinguished arts educator.

Woodruff’s first mural project was in collaboration with Wilmer Jennings in 1934. The four-panel mural, titled The Negro in Modern American Life: Agriculture and Rural Life; Literature, Music, and Art, was part of a public works project and a teaching project that involved both Woodruff’s students and a local junior high school. In 1935, Woodruff worked on Works Progress Administration (WPA) murals for the Atlanta School of Social Work.

Between 1931 and 1946, Woodruff served as the first chair of the newly established art department of Atlanta University. During the summer of 1936, he studied mural painting in Mexico under the mentorship of Diego Rivera. In 1946, he became a teacher at New York University, where he taught art for more than 20 years until his retirement in 1968. During the mid-1960s Woodruff and fellow artist Romare Bearden were instrumental in starting the Spiral

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About the Birmingham Museum of Art: Founded in 1951, the Birmingham Museum of Art has one of the finest collections in the Southeast. More than 27,000 objects displayed and housed within the Museum represent a rich panorama of cultures, including Asian, European, American, African, Pre-Columbian, and Native American. Highlights include the Museum’s collection of Asian art, Vietnamese ceramics, the Kress collection of Renaissance and Baroque paintings, sculpture, and decorative arts from the late 13th century to the 1750s, and the Museum’s world-renowned collection of Wedgwood, the largest outside of England.