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## Kerry James Marshall's Painting *Great America* Acquired by National Gallery of Art, Washington



Kerry James Marshall, *Great America*, 1994  
acrylic and collage on canvas  
National Gallery of Art, Washington, Gift of the Collectors Committee, 2011

Washington, DC—At its annual meeting in April, the Collectors Committee of the National Gallery of Art made possible the acquisition of *Great America* (1994) by Kerry James Marshall (b. 1955). Now on view in the East Building's Concourse galleries, it is the Gallery's first painting by this major midcareer artist. Marshall, a devoted student of the human figure and the history of art, draws upon the experience of African Americans to create imposing, contemporary history paintings.

"This year, the Collectors Committee's selections included this powerful painting by Kerry James Marshall, bringing the Gallery an important work by a significant American artist," said Earl A. Powell III, director, National Gallery of Art. "We are very grateful to the Collectors Committee, which enables the Gallery to enhance its holdings of contemporary art."

## ***Great America***

Marshall's mature career can be dated to 1980, when, inspired by the opening lines of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, he developed his signature motif of a dark, near-silhouetted figure in *A Portrait of the Artist as His Former Self*. Refusing both negative and positive stereotypes of black people, Marshall's figures of "extreme blackness" operate, he explains, "right on the borderline," forcing the viewer to find nuance and articulation within only apparently black forms. This strategy has been influential for younger artists, including Kara Walker and Glenn Ligon.

*Great America* is contemporaneous with Marshall's well-known Garden Project (1994–1995), a series of paintings based on housing projects with "gardens" in their names, such as Nickerson Gardens in Watts, where he grew up. In those works, Marshall sought to convey the dignity and complexity of lives set within difficult circumstances. In *Great America* he re-imagines a boat ride through the haunted tunnel of an amusement park as the Middle Passage of slaves from Africa to the New World. What might in other hands be a work of heavy irony becomes instead a delicate interweaving of the histories of painting and race. The painting, which is stretched directly onto the wall, creates a screen or backdrop onto which viewers project their own associations triggered by the diaphanous yet powerful imagery.

## **Collecting Art by African Americans**

The acquisition of *Great America* represents both a significant departure and a natural extension in the Gallery's collection of works by African American artists: while the Gallery has important works from earlier eras in various media, Marshall's work is the first truly contemporary painting to enter this collection. It joins works on paper by other African American artists of his generation, including Lorna Simpson (b. 1960), Fred Wilson (b. 1954), and Willie Cole (b. 1955). All of these artists share an interest in commenting on the African American experience through the integration of text with image.

Looking back a generation, the Gallery has important works by Sam Gilliam (b. 1933), Barkley Hendricks (b. 1945), Howardeena Pindell (b. 1943), Martin Puryear (b. 1941),

and Bob Thompson (b. 1937). Alma Thomas (1891–1978) can also be placed in this artistic generation, owing to her late flowering. All of these works focus on color and abstraction, and come from a period when many African American artists were working in the mainstream, often without broaching the subject and experience of race.

Finally, the Gallery's collection includes work by such monumental earlier figures as Romare Bearden (1911–1988), Jacob Lawrence (1917–2000), Norman Lewis (1909–1979), and James Wells (1902–1993). Charles White (1918–1979), who was Marshall's teacher and friend at the Otis Art Institute in Los Angeles, is also represented.

"Taken together, this rich array of works represents the variety of approaches, from abstract to figurative, from expressive to documentary, pursued by African American artists throughout the 20th century," noted Harry Cooper, curator of modern and contemporary art. "The Gallery still has much to do in building its collection to tell this story, but the foundation is surprisingly strong."

## **Online Tour**

### ***African American Artists: Collection Highlights***

[www.nga.gov/afamer](http://www.nga.gov/afamer) (<http://www.nga.gov/afamer>)

The Gallery's collection of American art includes some 150 works by African American artists. This online tour offers commentary on a selection of 22 paintings, works on paper, and sculpture, ranging from a colonial portrait by Joshua Johnson of Baltimore to modern and contemporary pieces.

## **About the Artist**

Kerry James Marshall was born in 1955 in Birmingham, Alabama. The subject matter of his paintings, installations, and public projects is drawn from African American culture and rooted in the geography of his upbringing: in 1963 he moved with his family to Nickerson Gardens, a public housing project in Watts, California, just a few years before the race riots began. Marshall was educated at the Otis Art Institute in Los Angeles, where he received a BFA in 1978 and an honorary doctorate in 1999.

After participation in a number of group shows, Marshall received a resident fellowship from the Studio Museum in Harlem in 1985, and in 1987 he and his family settled in Chicago. In 1991 he was awarded a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts that allowed him to concentrate full-time on his art. From 1993 to 2006, he taught at the School of Art and Design at the University of Illinois, Chicago. In 1997, he received the MacArthur Foundation Grant, an invitation to Documenta 10, and a place in the Whitney Biennial. His art was featured in the 1999/2000 Carnegie International Exhibition. In 2003 his work was featured in the Venice Biennale, and in 2007 Marshall received a second invitation to Documenta 12. Marshall lives and works in Chicago.

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## General Information

The National Gallery of Art and its Sculpture Garden are at all times free to the public. They are located on the National Mall between 3rd and 9th Streets along Constitution Avenue NW and are open Monday through Saturday from 10:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. and Sunday from 11:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. The Gallery is closed on December 25 and January 1. With the exception of the atrium and library, the galleries in the East Building will be closing gradually beginning in July 2013 and will remain closed for approximately three years for Master Facilities Plan and renovations. For specific updates on gallery closings, visit [www.nga.gov/renovation](http://www.nga.gov/renovation) (<http://www.nga.gov/renovation>) .

For information call (202) 737-4215 or the Telecommunications Device for the Deaf (TDD) at (202) 842-6176, or visit the Gallery's website at [www.nga.gov](http://www.nga.gov). Follow the Gallery on Facebook at [www.facebook.com/NationalGalleryofArt](http://www.facebook.com/NationalGalleryofArt) and on Twitter at [twitter.com/ngadc](http://twitter.com/ngadc).

Visitors will be asked to present all carried items for inspection upon entering. Checkrooms are free of charge and located at each entrance. Luggage and other oversized bags must be presented at the 4th Street entrances to the East or West Building to permit x-ray screening and must be deposited in the checkrooms at those entrances. For the safety of visitors and the works of art, nothing may be carried into the Gallery on a visitor's back. Any bag or other items that cannot be carried reasonably and safely in some other manner must be left in the checkrooms. Items larger than 17 by 26 inches cannot be accepted by the Gallery or its checkrooms.

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