



Exhibiting Blackness: African Americans and the American Art Museum

Bridget R. Cooks

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In 1927, the Chicago Art Institute presented the first major museum exhibition of art by African Americans. Designed to demonstrate the artists' abilities and to promote racial equality, the exhibition also revealed the art world's anxieties about the participation of African Americans in the exclusive venue of art museums—places where blacks had historically been barred from visiting let alone exhibiting. Since then, America's major art museums have served as crucial locations for African Americans to protest against their exclusion and attest to their contributions in the visual arts.

In *Exhibiting Blackness*, art historian Bridget R. Cooks analyzes the curatorial strategies, challenges, and critical receptions of the most significant museum exhibitions of African American art. Tracing two dominant methodologies used to exhibit art by African Americans—an ethnographic approach that focuses more on artists than their art, and a recovery narrative aimed at correcting past omissions—Cooks exposes the issues involved in exhibiting cultural difference that continue to challenge art history, historiography, and American museum exhibition practices. By further examining the unequal and often contested relationship between African American artists, curators, and visitors, she provides insight into the complex role of art museums and their accountability to the cultures they represent.

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