

North Carolina Central University Art Museum  
NEWS RELEASE

July 28, 2009

**Ruth Russell Williams: Master Storyteller – August 9-28, 2009**

Opening Reception: Sunday August 9, 2009 2:00-4:00 p.m.

Durham, N.C.--Opening Sunday, August 9 at the North Carolina Central University Art Museum *Ruth Russell Williams: Master Storyteller* will bring to the Research Triangle community works by the Henderson based self taught artist. Museum Director Kenneth G. Rodgers says "We are honored to have the opportunity to bring one of North Carolina's most original artists to Durham once again. We view this exhibition as an opportunity for the community to learn something about an artist who single handedly developed a regional, national and international reputation through an Annual Art exhibition held at her own home. Today she occupies a prominent place among self taught artists. It is by no means a comprehensive examination of this wonderfully creative artist, but there are many compelling paintings in the show."

Ruth Russell Williams was born in 1932 in Townsville, North Carolina to sharecroppers. At age 8, she began picking cotton to earn enough money to go to the State Fair. Later, her paintings would portray scenes from not only this early work but from many other childhood experiences including memories of going to work with her grandmother to the home of a plantation owner. Williams developed her talent along a path that took her from these humble beginnings to beauty salon owner and cosmetologist to national recognition as a folk artist.

In 1948 she married Odell Russell and they had four children but would later divorce. In 1974 she married building contractor Samuel Williams. Initially being drawn to ceramics she would teach ceramics at Vance-Granville Community college. With her children off to college she became restless and took to painting. She was self taught and initially felt that her paintings lacked merit. At an art exhibit at Kerr Lake in 1985, Williams was quite satisfied showing her work to lay men and women, but when she learned that North Carolina A & T art professor James McCoy was nearby, she grabbed up her paintings and hid behind bushes, fearful of presenting her work before a professional. Recognizing her apprehension, McCoy asked to see the work and immediately recognized Williams' unique esthetic sensibility. Encouraging her, McCoy informed Williams that she was a folk artist and predicted that she would one day become widely recognized. For the next two decades, Williams produced hundreds of paintings, each one telling a story of life as she saw it, in a simple, straightforward way.

Today Williams has become a commercial success due to collectors from all fifty states and Europe. Included in the exhibition are more than fifty paintings from lenders across North Carolina who have been long time admirers of Williams work. Visitors can expect to find a sampling of her signature themes. A number of paintings in the exhibition re-examine Williams many visits to her local church, and the numerous activities that were held there. "Mother's Day", included in the exhibition, presents this uniquely American secular endeavor that is a universal celebration of mothers. Centrally placed, a simple church is the meeting place for men, women and children alike who

casually exchange pleasantries before entering the sanctuary.

The exhibition will also provide the visitor with the opportunity to see paintings of a wide range of flowers, as independent still life, and as an integral part of larger landscapes. The majority of works, however, provide ample evidence of Williams' gift of storytelling. From picking plums and grapes, to eating water melon, to playing baseball, to gossiping, the range of her narrative canvases is extraordinary and imbued with touches of brilliant color. Mrs. Williams will attend the opening and have a number of recent works for sale.

The North Carolina Central University Art Museum is located on Lawson Street across from the Farrison-Newton Communications Building. Every effort is made to make all museum events accessible to the handicapped. For general information or assistance, please call 560-6211. For group visits, please call in advance. The Museum is open Tuesday through Friday from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. and Sunday from 2 p.m. to 5 p.m. Admission is free.