

Charles Ethan Porter: African American Master of Still Life

Opening Reception

Sunday, August 17, 2008
2:00-4:00 pm

Exhibition dates: August 17- November 2, 2008



Charles Ethan Porter, *Carnations*, Oil on Canvas, 1887.

Durham - The first major retrospective ever to be devoted to the work of Charles Ethan Porter in the United States will open at the North Carolina Central University Art Museum on August 17, 2008. ***Charles Ethan Porter: African American Still Life Artist*** will bring together more than fifty of the 19th century African American master's finest and most representative still life oil paintings, including dozens that have never before been on view in the South. Also included in the exhibition will be several landscapes, insect studies, and a number of figure studies in water color and pencil. Respected by Frederic Church and supported and endorsed by Mark Twain, Porter was the first African American artist to study at the National Academy of Design, matriculating there in 1869. The exhibition was organized by the New Britain Museum of American Art in Connecticut.

"This landmark loan exhibition will offer an extraordinary view of an African American artist largely unknown and appreciated for the better part of the twentieth century," stated Kenneth Rodgers, Director of the North Carolina Central University Art Museum. "We are extremely fortunate to bring to the Research Triangle community still life paintings and landscapes that radiate such beauty and unmatched detail. This exhibition, in which we are privileged to collaborate with the New Britain Museum of American Art in Connecticut, brings together many rare works from many private collections throughout New England."



Charles Ethan Porter

Charles Ethan Porter grew up in a poor working class family, yet he managed to obtain academic art training and have a long career, despite poverty, prejudice and pronouncements that his race was incapable of making art. In 1868 Porter left his native Rockville, Connecticut to study painting at Wesleyan Academy in Wilbraham, Massachusetts. In 1869 he was admitted to the National Academy of Design, becoming the first African American to matriculate there. Against tremendous financial obstacles, which would plague him his entire life, Porter would study at the National Academy of Design through 1873. Porter traveled to Paris in 1881 with letters of introduction from Mark Twain and studied at the Ecole Nationale Superieure des Arts Decoratifs.

Porter returned to Hartford in 1884 and took a studio there in the

tower of the Cheney Building where he held an exhibit and sale of his work. The following year he relocated to New York and exhibited at the National Academy of Design. From 1884 onward, until the end of his life, Porter would maintain studios in Hartford for a while and in New York.

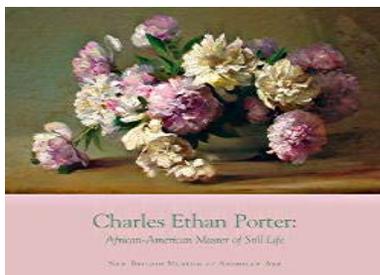
Most prominent in the exhibition are twenty still life paintings produced throughout his career, undoubtedly influenced by the grounding received at the National Academy of Design and include small groupings of fruit painting in a realistic vein. Porter achieved remarkable success with apple paintings and painted them for years. *Apples on the Ground* in the exhibition, shows apples spread apart so that all but one can be readily admired. Omitted is the traditional table or table cloth. Instead, a bed of luminous, heavily textured straw is contrasted with a few leaves and an ambiguous background.

Flower paintings are a particular strength of the exhibition and newly discovered paintings are joined with known ones. Readily available flowers of southern New England appear regularly and Porter often depicted peonies. In *Peonies in a Bowl*, Porter created a gorgeous harmony of pinks, lavenders, and whites to portray blooms so lush that some blend from their own weight. Brushwork is fluid, colors breathtakingly beautiful and lighting subtle.

Several recently discovered landscapes are also represented in the exhibition. Some were produced in his New England studio and others were done during his stay in Paris. In fact Porter believed that his best work was done in the French countryside. *Landscape with Grain Stacks* will show visitors that Porter's development as a landscapist grew immensely from the studio productions painted with dark colors and little detail. Here, Porter clearly paints outdoors, depicts a prominent foreground, establishes depth and distance through traditional perspective, and infuses the canvas with naturalistic light.

Several trompe l'oeil images of insects in the exhibition have come to light only within the last few years and will be exhibited in the context of Porter's oeuvre for the first time. They are amazing for their fineness of execution, displaying under the microscope, an extraordinary illusion of life. In *Flies on a Plate* four flies seem alive as they have just alighted on a plate. *Moth and Butterfly and Beetle on a Plate* similarly fool the eye with a remarkable attention to detail.

Visitors can also see several recently discovered figure studies that give testimony to Porter's draftsmanship and range. A soft-pencil drawing of 1880 is an eloquent portrayal of a standing male nude. A charcoal and pencil drawing, dated 1879, shows a Civil War soldier warming his hands at a fire. A watercolor depicts a young man holding a book open to a map. *Banjo Player*, is a pencil drawing of a seated man playing the musical instrument that African slaves introduced to America. Whether or not the drawings were used to fulfill functions in the production of other works of art is an important question.



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African-American Master of Still Life
New Britain Museum of American Art

Catalogue : The exhibition will be accompanied by a fully illustrated catalogue by Hildegard Cummings. Published by The New Britain Museum of American Art and distributed by University Press of New England, the publication will be available in soft cover edition in the Museum.

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 530-6211. For group visits, please call in advance. The Museum is open Sunday from 2:00 p.m. - 5:00 p.m.; and Tuesday through Friday from 9 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Admission is free.