



## MEMORIAL ART GALLERY ACQUIRES IMPORTANT WORKS BY 20TH-CENTURY MASTERS SAM GILLIAM AND ELIZABETH CATLETT

ROCHESTER, NY, November 18, 2014 — The Memorial Art Gallery has acquired important 20th-century works by two giants of American art, director Jonathan Binstock announced today. *Fishing Well* (1997), a painting by Sam Gilliam (b. 1933), and *Woman Fixing Her Hair* (ca. 1950), a sculpture by Elizabeth Catlett (1915–2012), recently went on view on the Gallery's first floor. The new acquisitions, the first since Binstock was appointed director in July 2014, reflect his expertise in the art of the post-World War II era.

### Sam Gilliam

Sam Gilliam established himself as a major artist in 1968 when he jettisoned the wooden stretcher bars that determined the shape of his paintings and allowed his vivid canvases to hang, billow and swing through space like drapery or bunting. Since that time, he has gone on to create work in an astounding variety of styles while remaining true to his fundamental disregard for the boundaries between painting, sculpture and architecture.



In the early 1990s Gilliam adopted birch plywood as a surface for his paintings, a practice he continues to the present day. Rather than establish a sculptural presence by draping unstretched canvas, Gilliam achieves physicality using actual sculptural material, in this case wood, and taking advantage of its relief properties. The surfaces of such works as *Fishing Well* are poured acrylic paint. Some of the images and textures derive from the artist applying and removing canvas to imprint the texture of the soft material onto the painting.

Born in Tupelo, Mississippi, in 1933, Gilliam spent his youth in Louisville, KY and received his BA and MA degrees from the University of Louisville. In 1962 he moved to Washington, DC, where he has lived ever since.

Gilliam has taught at the Corcoran College of Art, the Maryland Institute College of Art, the University of Maryland and Carnegie Mellon University. His work is in major collections across the country, and he is the recipient of such awards as multiple National Endowment for the Arts Activities Grants and a Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Fellowship.

In 2006, Gilliam gave a lecture at the Memorial Art Gallery titled “Early Carousels to Flat Color.” It was sponsored by UR’s Frederick Douglass Institute for African and African American Studies and Graduate Program in Visual and Cultural Studies and cosponsored by MAG, the Print Club of Rochester, and Rochester Institute of Technology. In the press announcement, the University of Rochester noted that Gilliam “has been called one of the most important and inventive colorists of the last 30 years.”

Sam Gilliam has had a long connection with Jonathan Binstock, who wrote his doctoral dissertation on the artist. In 2005, while he was curator of contemporary art at the Corcoran Gallery in Washington, DC, Binstock curated *Sam Gilliam: A Retrospective* and wrote the exhibition catalog.

“Sam is one of our great cultural treasures and I’m extraordinarily proud of this acquisition,” said Dr. Binstock. “He is a key bridge between mid-century abstraction and abstraction’s dramatic resurgence over the past 15 years or so, in the work of artists such as Rashid Johnson and Sterling Ruby. We owe a great debt to Sam’s steadfast belief in the boundless potential of human expression.”

*Fishing Well* (1997) is the gift of the artist, and joins three prints by Gilliam already in the Gallery’s permanent collection.

### **Elizabeth Catlett**

One of the most significant sculptors of the 20th century, Elizabeth Catlett was a lifelong social activist whose work was inextricably bound up with her experience as an African American woman in an age of widespread segregation.

Born in Washington, DC, Catlett graduated from Howard University in 1935, and obtained a master’s degree from the State University of Iowa, studying under painter Grant Wood and sculptor Henry Stinson.

In 1946, Catlett moved to Mexico on a Rosenwald Fund Fellowship where she studied traditional ceramic sculpture with Francisco Zúñiga and joined the Taller de Gráfica Popular, printmakers dedicated to promoting social change. She often used her art to depict the dignity and the exhaustion of workers, the concerns of mothers for their children, and the crushing realities of poverty. Her political views would eventually lead to her being identified as an “undesirable alien” by the US State Department and banned for nearly a decade from the US. She became a Mexican citizen and taught sculpture at the National Autonomous University of Mexico in Mexico City until retiring in 1975.

Throughout her career, Catlett remained deeply committed to the causes of social justice and in the 1960s was a vocal supporter of the Civil Rights movement. In the 1990s she was “rediscovered,” with a major show at the June Kelly Gallery in New York City and a retrospective at the Neuberger Museum in Purchase, NY. Her reputation was further cemented by the publication of *Elizabeth Catlett: An American Artist in Mexico* (2000) by Dr. Melanie Anne Herzog.

Catlett died in Cuernavaca, Mexico in 2012. She was 96 years old.



*Woman Fixing Her Hair*, a terracotta sculpture from around 1950, is characteristic in its attention to the subject’s African American ethnicity. It’s a small work, 18 inches tall, but its dignity and simple lines give a feeling of monumentality. The addition of pigment to the surface speaks to it as a finished piece and not simply a preliminary study. The form and gestures are echoed in a later sculpture by the same name that was purchased by the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1993.

Catlett was also a talented printmaker who throughout her long career produced lithographs and linocuts that celebrate the heroic lives of African American women; the Gallery owns three such works dating from the 1990s.

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