

# ***African American Designers in Chicago: Art, Commerce and the Politics of Race***

Chicago Cultural Center (October 27, 2018–March 3, 2019); curated by Daniel Schulman, Chris Dingwall, and Tim Samuelson; exhibition and brochure design by David Hartt (Exhibition Review)

Hannah Pivo

*African American Designers in Chicago: Art, Commerce and the Politics of Race* demands—and rewards—viewers' focus and attention. The exhibition surveys the history of design by and for African Americans in Chicago from 1900 to the early 1980s, drawing on several previously unexplored archives<sup>1</sup> to present wide-ranging ephemera (e.g., photographs, correspondence, magazines) and material remnants of the design process itself, such as sketches and pastes-ups. These documents, along with numerous finished images and products on display, provide a vivid portrait of nearly a century of design history, largely overlooked until recent years. Moreover, they illustrate the argument that design exists at the crossroads of creative and economic interests and is thus a potent site for political engagement and a battleground for racial equality.

Presenting such a large amount of archival material in a compelling manner is a challenge that has been met with bravado. The show occupies a spacious exhibition hall in the Chicago Cultural Center. This grand civic building, located in the heart of the city's downtown and frequent host to public cultural events, provides a setting that literally relocates this historic material from the city's margins to its center. At the gallery's threshold, a free-standing white wall features the exhibition's title in bold black text; it operates as a physical intervention into the building's neoclassical ornamentation and a metaphor for inserting blackness onto the largely white field of design history.

Upon entering, one encounters a sea of twenty-one shallow cases, arranged to form an expansive grid (see Figure 1). These cases contain manifold treasures—books, advertisements, album covers, sheet music, printed textiles, and more—that make up the bulk of the exhibition. Posters, prints, and other works on paper are displayed along two walls; product and packaging designs occupy a handful of tables and wall-hung cases. Much credit is due to exhibition designer David Hartt for this scheme,

1 Most notable among these archives are the Vivian G. Harsh Research Collection of Afro-American History and Literature at the Chicago Public Library and the Special Collections and University Archives at the Richard J. Daley Library at the University of Illinois at Chicago.



Figure 1  
Installation view, *African American Designers in Chicago: Art, Commerce and the Politics of Race*. Chicago Cultural Center, 2018. Photo by James Prinz.

which affords gravitas to small-scale objects and communicates a sense of the vast quantity of archival material that curators Daniel Schulman, Chris Dingwall, and Tim Samuelson encountered in their research.<sup>2</sup>

The exhibition is organized chronologically, with four temporal divisions: I. Futures 1900–1926; II. Renaissance 1920–1945; III. Abundances 1945–1963; IV. Revolutions 1963–1980. A meticulous historical narrative is presented through the displayed works and exhibition text, which contains copious historical context and analysis. The first section, “Futures,” establishes the foundational influence of black visionaries (including W.E.B. Du Bois) on Chicago’s African American community in the early twentieth century. It outlines how their arguments for black dignity and civil rights affected the city’s print culture and its beauty culture—exemplified by elegant packaging and advertising for Nile Queen Cosmetics.

The “Renaissance” section addresses the years of the Great Migration and Great Depression, focusing on the development of educational systems and arts opportunities on Chicago’s south side. These include Madame C. J. Walker Beauty Colleges (a national network providing black women with education and work opportunities in the beauty industry) and the South Side Community Art Center, founded in 1939 and still operating today. The work of designer and illustrator Charles C. Dawson (1889–1981) is represented through book and magazine covers and beauty product packaging designs. Dawson’s “Boston Massacre”

<sup>2</sup> Personal conversation with curator Daniel Schulman, December 18, 2018.

diorama—exhibited at the 1940 American Negro Exposition as one of thirty-three dioramas depicting achievements in black history—is an arresting depiction of violence that resonates sharply with the present day.

“Abundances” explores the 1940s through 1960s, bringing fresh perspective to the familiar story of postwar American economic growth and consumerism. The Johnson Publishing Company, known for *Jet* and *Ebony* magazines, is introduced, with particular attention paid to LeRoy Winbush (1915–2007), the company’s first art director and founder of the eponymous design firm Winbush Associates.

“Revolutions,” the fourth and final section, presents a compelling duality of black designers who continued in the corporate footsteps of their midcentury predecessors and those who sought different paths. Of note is Charles Harrison, the first African American designer hired by Sears Roebuck & Company, whose work includes mass-produced furniture, household appliances, and electronics for various manufacturers. Predating his time at Sears, Harrison’s iconic 1962 redesign of the View-Master transformed the previously cumbersome stereoscopic viewer into a child-friendly novelty. Harrison also appears in a video that plays in the gallery, showing footage from February 2000 of Victor Margolin (University of Illinois at Chicago professor emeritus), who contributed significantly to the exhibition, in conversation with seven pioneering African American designers, most now deceased.<sup>3</sup> Whereas the objects on view represent accomplishments, this video serves as a pointed reminder of the challenges black designers face, as Harrison and others describe the racism they encountered while navigating academic training and professional practice.

Also receiving ample attention in this section, Emmett McBain’s (1935–2012) career illustrates how personal politics were balanced with corporate interests. As art director for Vince Cullers Advertising (among the first black-owned agencies), McBain designed ads promoting the firm that confronted black stereotypes. For instance, “Black Is Beautiful” (1969) is a text-based design in which a list of phrases, including “black magic” and “little black sambo,” is followed by the phrase “white lies.” In 1971, McBain helped form Burrell-McBain, a firm that produced ads for corporate giants like McDonald’s, tailored specifically to black consumers. McBain also created more socially motivated graphics for black authors and artists, as well as community and political organizations. These more radical impulses are also represented in works by the artist collective AfriCOBRA, including *When Styling* (1973), a silkscreen print by Barbara Jones-Hogu (1938–2017) that is

3 Video recording of “A Conversation with the Pioneers,” final session of the symposium “African-American Designers: The Chicago Experience Then and Now,” DuSable Museum of African American History, February 5, 2000, organized by Victor Margolin and Charles Branham, sponsored by the DuSable Museum of African American History and the University of Illinois at Chicago. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jhq3YQilEtM> (accessed May 9, 2019).

among the most visually striking pieces in the show. In acid-bright hues, it depicts two figures surrounded by text reading: “When styling think of self-determination-liberation.”

The exhibition’s overarching chronology is disrupted in several instances, when material in the cases is separated from related objects or wall-hung works. For instance, Jackie Ormes’s (1911–1985) Patti-Jo doll is displayed on a table at a distance from its corresponding cartoons and print ads. Achieving an uninterrupted grid of cases seems to have necessitated the divisions, and yet these ruptures are useful for prompting recognition of thematic threads that crisscross the show’s otherwise linear timeline. Some themes are explicitly identified in the exhibition text, such as the tension between integrating into mainstream design structures versus building autonomous black institutions. Other themes become apparent through viewing, including how race intersects with gender and class and the key role of education—from elite arts institutions to community arts centers—in providing opportunities and shaping design cultures.

Perhaps the most significant takeaway from the exhibition is the manifold pathways for further research that it presents. The exhibition brochure, which features an essay by curator Chris Dingwall mirroring the show’s chronology, also includes numerous brief designer biographies “to give a sense of the wider collective story” of Chicago’s African American designers and suggest paths of inquiry that remain unexplored.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, this show is just one of several recent projects in Chicago to address such histories, reflecting not only a broader shift in scholarly focus toward the so-called periphery but also a notable emergence of high-profile funding for such efforts, as this and numerous other 2018 projects were supported by the Art Design Chicago initiative, a year-long exploration of the city’s art and design history led by the Terra Foundation for American Art.<sup>5</sup> However, as *African American Designers in Chicago* shows, center and periphery are entirely matters of perspective, as black designers have long played a central role in shaping Chicago’s industrial, political, and creative communities.

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4 Exhibition brochure, *African American Designers in Chicago: Art, Commerce and the Politics of Race* (Chicago, IL: Chicago Department of Cultural Affairs and Special Events, 2018).

5 Projects funded by Art Design Chicago and highlighting histories of African American designers included *The Time Is Now! Art Worlds of Chicago’s South Side, 1960–1980* at University of Chicago’s Smart Museum of Art (September 13–December 30, 2018); *Up is Down: Mid-century Experiments in Advertising and Film at the Goldsholl Studio* at Northwestern University’s Block Museum of Art (September 18–December 9, 2018); and the conference “Chicago Design: Histories and Narratives, Questions and Methods” (November 2018), organized by Bess Williamson (School of the Art Institute of Chicago) and Jonathan Mekinda (University of Illinois at Chicago), which included several papers on the topic.