

# PRESS RELEASE

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## **SEATTLE ART MUSEUM PREMIERES MAJOR NEW EXHIBITION FEATURING ROBERT COLESCOTT, KERRY JAMES MARSHALL, AND MICKALENE THOMAS**

Opening February 2018, *Figuring History* explores the work of three American artists redefining contemporary history painting



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SEATTLE, WA - The Seattle Art Museum presents *Figuring History: Robert Colescott, Kerry James Marshall, Mickalene Thomas* (February 15–May 13, 2018), a new exhibition organized by SAM featuring three leading American artists from three generations whose work redefines history painting in a contemporary context. The large-scale paintings on view are distinctive in style, subject matter, and in the historic moments they reference, but collectively they critique and redefine mainstream narratives of history and representation. In their portrayals, these artists provide testimony centered on Black experience.

The genre of history painting occupies a privileged place in the history of European art. Beginning in the Renaissance with representations of mythological, religious, and literary themes, the most famous artists of the time were commissioned to commemorate pivotal historical events that defined national identities. These large-scale works, done in the grand style, were displayed in ceremonial venues and celebrated the ruling class. Colescott, Marshall, and Thomas all lay claim to the history of the genre, but with a poignant retelling of American history from a Black perspective, giving prominence to histories and individuals that have been erased or suppressed.

The exhibition features loans from several institutions and collections, as well as works from SAM's collection, including the recently acquired *Les Demoiselles d'Alabama: Vestidas* (1985) by Colescott. In addition, Mickalene Thomas plans to make new works specifically for the exhibition.

"We are thrilled to bring together the extraordinary work of Robert Colescott, Kerry James Marshall, and Mickalene Thomas at the Seattle Art Museum," says Kimerly Rorschach, SAM's Illsley Ball Nordstrom Director and CEO. "The urgent themes of *Figuring History* reflect the museum's mission to be a place where exciting and challenging questions—even of our own institution—can be asked."



“*Figuring History* opens a door into a labyrinth of questions,” says Catharina Manchanda, SAM’s Jon & Mary Shirley Curator of Modern & Contemporary Art. “Who writes history, who is present in its accounts—but also how do we square, reassess, and go forth with the artistic, social, and political histories that we have all inherited? These artists and their work speak about the past as much as the present.”

In conjunction with the exhibition, the Seattle Art Museum will publish a full-color exhibition catalogue, also titled *Figuring History: Robert Colescott, Kerry James Marshall, Mickalene Thomas*. It will feature an introduction by Catharina Manchanda, essays by art historians Lowery Stokes Sims and Jacqueline Francis, and interviews with Kerry James Marshall and Mickalene Thomas.

#### ROBERT COLESCOTT (1925-2009)



Born in Oakland, California, Robert Colescott witnessed the Great Depression in his early years and later served in the Army during World War II. Several years of studies and teachings in France and Egypt following the war gave him an outside perspective and critical edge on the racial conflicts in the United States. The cartoon-like aesthetic of his earlier works take to task celebrated milestones in the history of painting from Van Eyck to Picasso. A decade later, he applies his boldly expressive style to stories that weave the fate of ordinary individuals into the fabric of stories weighed down by the colonial past.

He poses his subjects as observers, agents, and narrators of an incomplete history, in need of revision.

#### KERRY JAMES MARSHALL (b. 1955)

Kerry James Marshall was born in Birmingham, Alabama; he and his family moved to the Watts neighborhood of Los Angeles in 1963, a formative time and place for the artist, who now lives and works in Chicago. Marshall’s commanding portraits and tableaux combine familiar representational forms, such as the portrait of the artist or the academic life-drawing class, with political references that frame deeply probing historical narratives.



#### MICKALENE THOMAS (b. 1971)



Mickalene Thomas' monumental portraits and nudes of women recall the odalisques and muses familiar from a long line of European art history. Her figures do not lend themselves to passive consumption but are powerful agents who confront us. Material culture and the aesthetics of ornamentation play a central role in her work as she inflects and reimagines Matisse's arabesques and quasi-cubist spaces through the aesthetics of contemporary fashion and style. The power dynamics shift profoundly as Thomas negotiates gender and sexuality through a contemporary female gaze.

#### EXHIBITION ORGANIZATION AND SUPPORT

The exhibition is organized by the Seattle Art Museum.

Special exhibitions at SAM are made possible by donors to

#### **SAM FUND FOR SPECIAL EXHIBITIONS**

**Image credits:** *George Washington Carver Crossing the Delaware: Page from an American History Textbook*, 1975, Robert Colescott, acrylic on canvas, 84 x 108 in., Private Collection, St. Louis, © 2017 Estate of Robert Colescott / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York, Photo: Jean Paul Torno. *Les Demoiselles d'Alabama: Vestidas*, 1985, Robert Colescott, acrylic on canvas, 96 x 92 in. (233.6 x 233.6 cm), General Acquisition Fund, Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation Art Acquisition Fund, Margaret E. Fuller Purchase Fund, and Patricia Denny Art Acquisition Fund, 2016.12. © 2017 Estate of Robert Colescott / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. *School of Beauty, School of Culture*, 2012, Kerry James Marshall, acrylic and glitter on unstretched canvas, 108 x 158 in., Birmingham Museum of Art, Museum purchase with funds provided by Elizabeth (Bibby) Smith, the Collectors Circle for Contemporary Art, Jane Comer, the Sankofa Society, and general acquisition funds, 2012.57, image (c) Kerry James Marshall. *Le déjeuner sur l'herbe: Les Trois Femmes Noires*, 2010, Mickalene Thomas, rhinestone, acrylic and enamel on panel, 120 x 288 x 2 in., © Mickalene Thomas / Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York. Courtesy the artist and Lehmann Maupin, New York and Hong Kong.

#### **ABOUT SEATTLE ART MUSEUM**

As the leading visual art institution in the Pacific Northwest, SAM draws on its global collections, powerful exhibitions, and dynamic programs to provide unique educational resources benefiting the Seattle region, the Pacific Northwest, and beyond. SAM was founded in 1933 with a focus on Asian art. By the late 1980s the museum had outgrown its original home, and in 1991 a new 155,000-square-foot downtown building, designed by Robert Venturi, Scott Brown & Associates, opened to the public. The 1933 building was renovated and reopened as the Asian Art Museum in 1994. SAM's desire to further serve its community was realized in 2007 with the opening of two stunning new facilities: the nine-acre Olympic Sculpture Park (designed by Weiss/Manfredi Architects)—a “museum without walls,” free and open to all—and the Allied Works Architecture designed 118,000-square-foot expansion of its main, downtown location, including 232,000 square feet of additional space built for future expansion. The Olympic Sculpture Park and SAM's downtown expansion celebrate their tenth anniversary in 2017.

From a strong foundation of Asian art to noteworthy collections of African and Oceanic art, Northwest Coast Native American art, European and American art, and modern and contemporary art, the strength of SAM's collection of approximately 25,000 objects lies in its diversity of media, cultures and time periods.