

African American Artists in the WPA (Work Projects Administration) Print Collection

Three African American artists are represented in the WPA Print collection of Kelvin Smith Library Special Collections. The WPA provided an environment for the talent of these artists - Elmer W. Brown, Hughie Lee-Smith and Charles Sallee - to be recognized and appreciated. The WPA Print Collection is part of our Ernest J. Bohn Housing and Planning Library collection. Mr. Bohn, as Director of the Cleveland Metropolitan Housing Authority (later the Cuyahoga MHA) had been a supporter of artists and sculptors by incorporating their works in the housing estates in Cleveland. These artists had many things in common. They received their education at the Cleveland Institute of Art, were deeply involved in activities at Karamu House, and were employed by the Cleveland WPA in printmaking. The WPA was run by the Federal Arts Project to employ workers during and after the Depression. Karamu House was a center for cultural activities, founded in 1915 by social workers Rowena and Russell Jelliffe to promote interracial theater and the arts.

Elmer W. Brown, 1909-1971

Elmer W. Brown was born in Pittsburgh and lived in Columbus before moving to Cleveland when he was 20. He studied at the Cleveland Institute of Art and was active at Karamu House as an actor and stage designer as were many other African American artists and writers of the time. He was especially known in Cleveland for his WPA murals at Valleyview Homes and the Cleveland City Club building. He taught art classes before joining American Greetings in 1953. He was a painter, educator, decorator, cartoonist, illustrator, and designer.

Hughie Lee-Smith, 1915-1999

Hughie Lee-Smith was born in Eustis, Florida, lived in Atlanta until 1925, when he moved to Cleveland. He began attending art classes at the Cleveland Museum of Art and later graduated from the Cleveland Institute of Art in 1938. While in Cleveland, he became active at Karamu House as an actor, dancer, set designer and teacher. He worked in the Cleveland WPA project as a printmaker. Over the years he moved to South Carolina, Detroit, Chicago, New York, and Albuquerque, continuing to teach and paint, and winning awards such as the Emily Lowe Award and the Purchase Prize. He was elected to the National Academy of Design in 1967.

Charles Louis Sallee, 1911-2006

Charles L. Sallee, painter and graphic artist, was born in Oberlin, Ohio in 1911. He studied at Karamu House, the Institute of Art and earned a B.S. from Western Reserve University in 1939. After teaching in Cleveland schools he worked on WPA projects as a printmaker and mural painter. During World War II he worked as a cartographer and camouflage designer. Sallee, who continued to live in Cleveland, had for many years a successful career as an interior designer for hotels and corporate offices as well as private homes. After his retirement, he devoted his time to painting portraits.