



Paul Robeson

This exceptional collagraph by John T. Scott depicts renowned actor and baritone Paul Robeson in his iconic role of Brutus Jones, the main character of Eugene O'Neill's play, *The Emperor Jones*. Scott deftly captures the brooding figure of Jones, who stares over his shoulder, almost engulfed by his heavily decorated military jacket.

What type of work is this? There is one person, who takes up almost the entire print space. He stares out of the image, almost as a challenge to the viewer. His arm is crossed over his body in a protective manner. He is almost engulfed in this bulky uniform. His stance and gaze are both defensive and self-protective. The jacket seems to act as armor. He is a complex figure; the viewer is drawn first to his eyes, then to the many elements that seem to assemble him like a puzzle, from his hair to the braid on his arm. He is in stark contrast to the very simple flag-like background, fashioned in primary colors.

Circa 1971-73
Collagraph print
Approx. 42" h x 31" w

JOHN T. SCOTT
American
#1028

LET'S LOOK

What colors are being used?
What is the effect?

What are some examples of
texture?
Where are the areas of
contrast?

What are the different types
of decoration on the jacket?

In the play, the character of the Emperor Jones is an escaped convict who assumes leadership of a small Caribbean country. He becomes a brutal dictator, reflected in his given name, Brutus, and is later deposed and hunted through a dense jungle. The play, one of O'Neill's most well-known, is believed to be a thinly veiled critique of American interference in Haiti.

Paul Robeson

The title of this print, however, is not the character's name, but that of the actor portraying him. Paul Robeson was one of the most iconic figures of the 20th-century theater. Known for his powerful singing voice, Robeson was an exceptional scholar and athlete, earning a scholarship to Rutgers College. At Rutgers, Robeson was only the third Black student to attend the school, where he received top honors for his debate and oratory skills, won 15 letters in four varsity sports, was elected Phi Beta Kappa and became his class valedictorian. After graduating as one of the university's most decorated students, he attended Columbia University Law School and went on to practice law professionally for a time.

Robeson was encouraged to go on stage by his wife, Eslanda Goode. He became one of the brightest stars of the Harlem Renaissance, both with his singing career and as a thespian. He played a number of iconic roles: Joe in *Show Boat*, in which he sang his famous "Ole Man River"; the Moor in *Othello*, the

longest-running Shakespeare play in Broadway history; Jim Harris in *All God's Chillun Got Wings* and Brutus in *The Emperor Jones*, both plays by O'Neill which solidified his reputation.

Robeson was also a passionate civil rights activist. Even as his star rose on the stage and screen, he was subject to deep racism during the Jim Crow era. While starring in the London production of *Show Boat*, he moved to his family London, where his interest in his African heritage, ancestry and culture increased, which he detailed in an essay entitled "I Want to be African." In 1934, he enrolled in the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), a constituent college of the University of London, where he studied Phonetics, Swahili and other African languages.

Robeson also supported anti-imperialist efforts in other countries. He befriended British socialists, which led to him visiting the Soviet Union for the first time, where he first felt that he was treated as an equal. He supported the Republican, anti-fascist cause during the Spanish Civil War, visiting the warfront and singing for wounded soldiers. His relationship with Russia deepened; his support of communism and love of Russian folklore led him to visit the USSR several times. He was a fervent pan-Africanist. In 1937, he helped to establish the Council on African Affairs (CAA), which promoted African liberation in an era when few Americans actively engaged in such matters, and submitted a memorandum to the United Nations Commission on Human Rights in support of the African National Congress (ANC) in 1946. He also supported labor activism, and worked in support of the Allied powers during World War II, taking part in anti-Nazi demonstrations and performing for Allied forces. Unfortunately, Robeson's efforts led to his blacklisting during the McCarthy era.

About the Artist

"I'm an artist who works out of his history to hopefully bring my patch/voice to the quilt of mankind. That's all I want to do. It will not be until we recognize the value of each of those patches that we will have a culture that is intact." – John T. Scott

One of the art world's true renaissance men, John Scott led the Xavier University Art Department for 40 years, until his death in 2007. Winner of a prestigious "Genius Grant" from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation in 1992, Scott was born and raised in New Orleans in the Lower Ninth Ward, and graduated from Xavier and Michigan State University, where he studied under Charles Pollock, brother of Jackson Pollock. As a native of New Orleans, Scott was adept at channeling the spirit of the city into his artwork, and many of his pieces inhabit local outdoor spaces in a truly organic manner. He mastered a number of artistic techniques, including woodcut and collagraph prints, kinetic sculptures inspired by musical instruments and traditional African dance, and even cooking. Praised for filtering the spirit of the African diaspora through a modernist spirit, according to the New York Times, Scott left a legacy that lives on through his former students, colleagues and collaborators, such as Ron Bechet, Martin Payton and Steve Prince. Scott guided his students with the mantra "Each one teach one," instilling a practice of giving and mentorship alongside the development of artistic skill.

Art was in Scott's blood and future from early on, and he was encouraged to attend Xavier University while a student at Booker T. Washington High School. While at Xavier, he was mentored professors Numa Roussève and Sister Mary Lurana Neely, two members of the university's progressive art faculty who later encouraged him to find his voice, exhibit in national and regional art projects as part of Xavier's Art Guild, and eventually to teach at his alma mater. His return after completing his master of arts degree in 1965 marked the beginning of an era. He developed both as an artist and as a teacher, drawing upon his life in New Orleans and his Roman Catholic faith as inspiration.

In 1983, Scott received a grant to study in New York under the internationally acclaimed sculptor George Rickey. Though apprehensive about creating kinetic sculpture, fearing it be labeled derivative, Scott created some of his most fascinating work while working in this medium with Rickey's encouragement, most particularly with his *Diddlie Bow* series in the early 1980s. Inspired by a West African tale about the diddlie bow, which was created by West African hunters to pay homage to the animal, from the weapon used to kill it, Scott explained in an interview in 2002, "The ritual of using a weapon of war to create a libation of spiritual peace is commonplace. Wherever [Africans] went in the diaspora, the instrument came with us. That instrument came into the Mississippi Delta and it was called the diddlie bow. The musician's name Bo Diddley came from that instrument." The idea of weapons being used for peace, like swords being beaten into plowshares, also informed Scott's work based on the Crucifixion. One of his larger works features firearms literally composing the body of Christ and the cross.

Kinetic sculpture forms a large basis of Scott's larger work, as well. Many of his pieces can be found around the New Orleans area and farther afield, including *Ancestral Legacy*, located on the Xavier campus, and *Ocean Song*, which is housed in the city's Woldenberg Park. Scott was able to create these pieces, as well as others like *Spirit House* in Gentilly, and *Spirit Gates* (1994), commissioned for the New Orleans Museum of Art (NOMA) as an entryway into the Museum, thanks to the Macarthur grant. This allowed him to acquire a larger studio, which facilitated collaboration with such artists as celebrated Expressionist Frederick Brown, who created a 98-foot high canvas be installed in the Xavier University Library Resource Center.

Like a jazz musician, Scott was an innovator in whatever form of art he worked in. An avid calligrapher, he was known for dumping out waste bins and crafting pens from whatever he found there. He was also known for his exceptional printing techniques, in particular, the method known as collagraphy. This form or relief or intaglio printing involves building up the print plate with other objects to create an image. For Scott, creating collagraphs was very much like his sculpture, assembled from what he found in his environment.

Civil and human rights formed the backbone of Scott's work. As a student at Xavier, he would be keenly aware of the University's mission to serve Black and Native American students, and may have had a front seat to the arrival of Freedom Riders on Xavier's campus in 1961, welcomed by Dr. Norman C. Francis, the university's president. Concerned not only with the state of affairs in the United States, but conflicts all across the African continent, Scott channeled his impressions into his work, whether focusing on historical figures like Robeson or Marcus Garvey, biblical and mythological figures like Jonah and Icarus, or the lives of Black children, such as in *Desire Street Fountain*.

Scott's work is featured in some of the most prestigious collections in the country, including the Louisiana Humanities Center of the Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities, the New Orleans Museum of Art, the Ogden Museum of Southern Art in New Orleans, the Louisiana State University Museum of

Art in the Shaw Center for the Arts in Baton Rouge, the Amistad Research Center Collection in New Orleans, the Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington, D.C., the High Museum of Art in Atlanta, Georgia, and Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee.

Let's Look Again

Portraits are often meant to convey a particular message about the sitter. This is determined by everything from clothing and hairstyle to the way the subject is positioned. What message do you think this portrait conveys? How is this communicated?

Writing Activities

Both Scott and Robeson were passionate about civil rights. Write a paragraph about something you are passionate about.

Robeson and Scott were both multifaceted artists, exploring many different forms of artistry. In what ways did this enhance their self-expression?

There are only two areas of color in this print. What do you think they symbolize?

Scott created much of his work by assembling a variety of objects to create on unified theme. What kinds of things can you identify in this piece?

Hands-On Activity

Current affairs figure largely in both Scott's and Robeson's work. Create a piece about a current topic from found objects.

References:

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