
Gay Sweely, Ph.D.
Associate Professor, Art History
Department of Art & Design, College of Arts and Sciences
Eastern Kentucky University

Abstract
Can you name an African-American artist? Why not? What impact has the African Diaspora had on contemporary American Art? Africans have always been actively involved in making art – in Africa and also after being transported to America in the early days of the 17th century. However, under the duress of slavery and negative racial perceptions, the extreme beauty, creativity, resourcefulness, and artistic achievements of the leading African-American artists in our country were overlooked for many years. This presentation will show that, contrary to the early negative perceptions, the African Diaspora positively affected contemporary American art. At first, it was perceived that there was no art or any culture in Africa. The early slaves became artisans who were originally exposed to European art, and they adapted these art forms to their own African traditions. However, experimentation would eventually lead these artisans and craftsmen to infuse their art forms with a mixture of West African, European, and colonial American cultural ideas to produce the vibrant African-American arts of today. The 2015 Roark Lecture will present notable African-American artists – to be discussed, revered, and remembered.