Searching for the Transatlantic Freedom: The Art of Valerie Maynard

Karen Berisford Getty
Virginia Commonwealth University

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/etd
Part of the Arts and Humanities Commons

© The Author

Downloaded from
https://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/etd/847

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at VCU Scholars Compass. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of VCU Scholars Compass. For more information, please contact libcompass@vcu.edu.
SEARCHING FOR TRANSATLANTIC FREEDOM:
THE ART OF VALERIE MAYNARD

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University

By

Karen Berisford Getty
Bachelor of Arts, The College of William and Mary, 2002

Director: Dr. Babatunde Lawal
Professor, Department of Art History

Virginia Commonwealth University
Richmond, Virginia
December 2005
Acknowledgements

I wish to thank my parents, Juan and Melba Getty, for their endless and immeasurable support throughout my educational endeavors. They show me unconditional love and have always believed in my abilities, even when I do not. I thank my sister Alison, and my brother Paul, for always keeping a smile on my face and for always “understanding” me. I thank Paul Ballard, my friend and coworker, for always listening. I owe many thanks to my advisor, Dr. Babatunde Lawal, for his direction with this thesis. His vast knowledge of African and African-American art never ceases to amaze me, and his willingness to share his wisdom with his students is admirable. He has forever changed my aesthetic vision and broadened my knowledge and perspective on art and life. I am also indebted to Dr. Eric Garberson, who served as reader for my thesis and has also worked with me throughout my studies at VCU. Thank you for your patience and direction. Also, thank you to Dr. Charles Brownell, who developed and enriched my writing and lecturing skills.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Figures........................................................................................................iv

Abstract..................................................................................................................vi

Introduction.............................................................................................................1

Chapter One. From the Beginning
to World War II.....................................................................................5

Chapter Two. Valerie Maynard:
A Biographical Sketch.............................................................................10

Chapter Three. *We Are Tied to the Very Beginning*: Embodying the African-American Struggle for Freedom....................................................................15

Chapter Four. From *Rufus* and *Strange Fruit* to
the *Apartheid Series*: Connecting the Two Sides of the Atlantic..............................25

Conclusion............................................................................................................31

Bibliography..........................................................................................................34

Illustrations...........................................................................................................42
LIST OF FIGURES


4. Photograph of Valerie Maynard


7. Kongo *booka* figure, Mboma Kongo *diboondo*, Zaire.

8. Fon, Abomey Style, Female Figure, Republic of Benin (Collected in Lome, Togo), Wood.


15. Valerie Maynard, Detail of *Baltimore City College High School Murals*, 1980, Black walnut, two panels.


ABSTRACT

SEARCHING FOR TRANSATLANTIC FREEDOM: 
THE ART OF VALERIE MAYNARD

By Karen Berisford Getty, M.A.

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of 
Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University. Virginia Commonwealth University, 2005.

Director: Dr. Babatunde Lawal, Professor, Department of Art History

This thesis focuses on an African-American female artist, Valerie Maynard, examining 
how she synthesizes African and American elements in her works. It provides detailed 
formal and iconographical analyses, revealing concealed meanings and paying special 
attention to those works with which the artist mirrors the Black experience in the United 
States and Africa on the other side of the Atlantic. In the process, the thesis sheds new 
light on the significance of Valerie Maynard’s work and how she has used some of them 
to embody the Black quest for freedom and social justice during the Civil Rights struggle 
of the 1960s and 1970s and beyond.
Introduction

Valerie Maynard is a prominent contemporary African-American female artist. She has been active since the early 1960s. Yet for reasons unknown, there are few publications on her. This thesis seeks to correct this deficiency. It proposes to focus not only on her development as an artist, and how she used her works to promote the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s and 1970s, but also on how her artistic approach reflects a synthesis of African and African-American aesthetics. In the process, I hope to shed some light on the degree to which her work embodies what W.E.B. DuBois calls “a double consciousness” in the black experience in the United States—that is, the fact of being African and American at the same time.\(^1\) The thesis will also examine the various implications of abstraction in Valerie Maynard’s art. For when applied to her work, the term “abstraction” takes on a new meaning, transcending its typical definition. As Nkiru Nzegwu says, “her works raise serious questions…about the conceptual underpinnings of abstraction…and what these actually reveal about alternative ways of artistically apprehending reality.”\(^2\)

The fact that the literature on Valerie Maynard is scanty, in spite of her popularity, makes this project even more compelling. Maynard’s creative and technical


skills are exceptional. Hence her art resonates with many people, inviting them to experience a given representation through their own interpretation. Many of her works draw attention to the human quest for social justice and freedom on both sides of the Atlantic.

As an artist of African descent in the United States, Maynard is involved in the various debates on "the state" of African-American art. Given their taxonomic focus, art historical studies have developed categories for identifying artists according to style, gender, race and so on. With a newfound appreciation for African-American art, scholars attempt to create a foundation for theorizing about the subject. The process has been challenging and frustrating for artists such as Maynard, because of the tendency of art critics to categorize Black artists instead of seeing them as creative individuals.

When dealing with any type of diaspora art, the scholar is confronted with an amalgamation of cultures and aesthetics that frequently defies classification due to subjective appropriations, reinterpretations or re-contextualization of carry-overs from the homeland. This phenomenon is often reflected in African-American art, though in different forms. Needless to say, some African-American artists choose to relate their work visually to their African heritage while others do not, but simply give free reins to their creative impulses.

Black or African-American art is often discussed as a form of expression separate from that produced by American artists of the majority or mainstream culture. However, a Black artist is no different from any other when it comes to expressing one’s creative sensibilities.
This thesis focuses on Valerie Maynard because she synthesizes African and American elements in many of her works. It will showcase her most famous sculpture *We Are Tied to the Very Beginning* (1969). For this piece not only exemplifies W.E.B. DuBois' idea of "double-consciousness," it also provides an insight into the complex dynamics influencing African-American art.

Some of the materials analyzed in the thesis were collected from the artist who currently resides in Baltimore, Maryland. Throughout the research period, the author contacted the artist via phone and email on a regular monthly basis. Others materials come from the limited scholarly literature on her works. The most significant publication on her so far is an article by Nkiru Nzegwu entitled "Reality on the Wings of Abstraction" published in *International Review of African-American Art* (1996). In the article, Nzegwu draws attention to the abstract qualities of Maynard's work. According to her, Maynard "creates under a sacral or spiritualized notion of abstraction, similar to that employed by traditional African artists in representing metaphysical or transphysical reality."³

Maynard freely expresses her thoughts and beliefs about the interrelationship of art and life. In an interview with Mildred Thompson (published in *Gumbo Ya Ya: Anthology of Contemporary African-American Women Artists*, 1995), she articulates her political concerns as well as her deep belief in the relevance of African values to the Black experience in America.

³ Nzegwu, 3.
Aside from these two articles, there have been very few direct references to Maynard and her work. Other information on her can be found in exhibition catalogues, encyclopedia entries, journal articles, or introductory books on African-American art.

The *St. James Guide to Black Artists* (1997) provides an entry on Maynard. Biographical information is given, such as her place of birth, educational background, career history, as well as various awards received. It also has a list of her past individual as well as group exhibitions. In another article, A.M. Weaver observes that Maynard is sincere in her visual interpretation of the African and African-American experience. Weaver also notes her ability to not only work in a variety of media, but also to clearly articulate her theme or idea.4

Another encyclopedic entry can be found in *The Black Artist in America: An Index to Reproductions* (1991). It documents various illustrations of Maynard's work in books, periodicals, and exhibition catalogues published before 1990.

This thesis is divided into four chapters. The first chapter deals with African-American art from the Antebellum/Colonial period up to World War II. The second introduces Valerie Maynard, discussing her educational background, her career and exhibitions. The third focuses on the artist’s work, *We Are Tied to the Very Beginning* (1969), providing detailed formal and iconographical analyses and how the work embodies the African-American struggle for freedom and social justice. The fourth chapter includes a short analysis of other works by Maynard from the early seventies, *Rufus* and *Strange Fruit* (1970), and the *No Apartheid* series (1980s/90s). The conclusion summarizes the significance of the artist’s works.

---

Chapter One
African-American Art From the Beginning to World War II

In order to understand the art of Valerie Maynard, it is necessary to be aware of the development of African-American visual culture from the Colonial/Antebellum period to the early 1960s.

To begin with, the first African captives brought to what is now the United States, an artistic tradition that ignored imitative naturalism, emphasizing stylization and the use of art to reinforce religious beliefs, cultural and aesthetic values as well as the daily struggle for survival. Aspects of this tradition survived in early African-American woodcarvings, ironworking, musical instruments, pottery, quilts, and grave decoration, among others.\(^5\)

Coming from Europe where the emphasis was on naturalism, the first Euro-Americans—and the slave masters—looked down on African stylization as “crude,” “under-developed” and “primitive.” They trained some African-born artists to produce European-type crafts. But as David Driskell observes, “the majority felt that blacks lacked the intellectual capacity to engage in any form of art not closely associated with

labor and few people were willing to permit aspiring black artists the opportunity to test their skills." Eventually a new breed of formally and informally trained Black artists (such as Joshua Johnson, Patrick Reason, Robert S. Duncanson, Edward Mitchell Bannister, Edmonia Lewis, and Henry O. Tanner) emerged with naturalistic skills that compared favorably with those of their white contemporaries. Apart from displaying their talents in portraiture and landscapes, some of these artists used their creative skills to reinforce the black quest for freedom.

For example, Patrick Reason's 1839 engraving *Am I Not a Man and a Brother?* (figure 1), which will be discussed in chapter three, was created to draw attention to the injustices of slavery. Mary Edmonia Lewis' 1867 sculpture *Forever Free*, on the other hand, captures the joyful reaction of two former slaves to the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863 (figure 2).

African-American art underwent dramatic changes after World War I (1914-1918). First, the failure of the Reconstruction Programs in the South, among other problems, had led many blacks to migrate in large numbers to the urban and more industrialized North, where they found better jobs. Harlem (New York) soon became a center of black cultural, political, and artistic activism. Second, the influence of African sculpture on Modern European art inspired many African-American artists to return to the non-naturalistic traditions of their African ancestors. Howard University professor and philosopher Alain Locke became the leading authority on contemporary African-American culture. As LeFalle-Collins puts it, "He promoted the concept of the New

---

Negro, the establishment of a national cultural identity in all of the arts, and the belief that art by African-Americans should reflect their African heritage and their native Southern folk expressions." In response, many African-American artists such as Aaron Douglas, Frank Dillon, and Sargent Claude Johnson stylized their forms under the influence of African sculptures and masks.

Patronage provided by philanthropic and Civil Rights organizations such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (founded in 1909), the National Urban League (founded in 1911), and the Harmon Foundation (founded in 1926) enabled many Black artists, writers, playwrights and dancers to develop their talents to the fullest. The Harmon Foundation, in particular, organized several exhibitions that showcased promising and accomplished Black artists, in addition to awarding special prizes.

The crash of the stock market in 1929 ushered in the Depression years of the 1930s and early 1940s—a period of large scale unemployment, public protests, and riots. In 1933, President Franklin Roosevelt established the New Deal Program that resulted in the creation in 1935 of the Work Projects Administration (WPA), which employed both Black and White artists to produce murals, paintings, public monuments, and so on for the government. The emphasis on American history and culture encouraged social realism, a mode of representation influenced by Mexican muralists such as Diego Rivera and José Clemente Orozco. The Social Realists believed that art should not be separated from its cultural and political contexts. The paintings and drawings of Charles White

---

(who had studied in Mexico) reflect this perspective. His 1946 lithograph, *Negro Grief* (figure 3) speaks volumes about the plight of the poor during the Depression years. In short, black artists such as Hale Woodruff, Charles Alston, Jacob Lawrence, John Wilson and John Biggers used social realism to draw attention to the marginalization of Blacks.

By the end of World War II (1945), many prominent European modernists such as Mark Rothko, Arshile Gorky, and William de Kooning had settled in the United States. They later came together with radical American artists such as Jackson Pollock, Barnett Newman, Ellsworth Kelly, Helen Frankenthaler and Morris Louis to create the non-referential art of Abstract Expressionism and Color Field Painting in which pure form and color took precedence over content and meaning. Although some African-American artists like Romare Bearden, Norman Lewis, and Hale Woodruff participated in the new "Abstract" movement (which dominated the American art scene between the late 1940s and the 1960s), they still managed to convey certain black-specific messages in their works.

The social realism of the 1930s and 1940s declined partly because private sponsorship of the arts replaced government patronage after World War II and partly because of McCarthyism, which accused artists critical of the status quo of having Communist sympathies. McCarthyism came to an end in 1954 when Congress censored Senator McCarthy for turning his anti-Communist investigations into a witch-hunt. During the same year, the Supreme Court ruling Brown vs. Topeka Board of Education outlawed segregation and racial discrimination in U.S. schools. This ruling encouraged African-Americans to challenge other Jim Crow laws in the South. The U.S.

---

8 McCarthyism was named after Senator Joseph R. McCarthy, chairman of the Senate subcommittee that investigated those suspected of being Communists.
involvement in the Vietnam War between 1961 and 1975 generated several public
demonstrations involving both black and white protesters. In effect, this period witnessed
the rise of social protest art, with which American artists across the racial divide critiqued
the government. It was also the era of the Black Arts Movement, when many African-
American artists used visual and performing arts to empower their struggle for freedom,
in addition to exploring their African artistic heritage at a much deeper level. Valerie
Maynard is one of these artists.
Chapter Two
Valerie Maynard: A Biographical Sketch


Maynard has been a lecturer at Northeastern University, Boston; Goddard College, Plainfield, Vermont; Rutgers University, New Jersey; Harlem State Office Building, New York; College of the Virgin Islands, St. Thomas, (1979-1985). She was printmaker-in-residence at the Women’s Studio Workshop, Rosendale, New York (1989).

She has been a visiting professor, artist-in-residence, and Rockefeller Humanities fellow at the Susan B. Anthony Center for Women’s Studies, University of Rochester, New York, (1992-1994).

She has been the recipient of the Riksututallningar National Museum purchase/travel/lecture grant, Stockholm, Sweden (1975); Virgin Islands Humanities Council research grant (1986-1987); Atlanta Life Insurance Sculpture Award (1990); New York Foundation for the Arts grant for printmaking (1990); New Forms Regional Initiative grant, New England Foundation for the Visual Arts grant (1992); Artist of the Year, MacDowell Colony, Peterborough, New Hampshire grant (1992); MacDowell Colony Fellowship (1992-1993); Rockefeller Humanities Fellowship (1992-1994).


She participated in group exhibitions at the Black American Graphics Studio Museum, New York (1979) (traveling through 1984); Studio Museum in Harlem, New
She is represented in many important collections, including the Brooklyn Museum, New York; Memorial Art Gallery, University of Rochester, New York; National African-American Museum, Ohio; National Museum of Mozambique; National Museum of Nigeria, Lagos; Riksututallningar National Museum, Stockholm, Sweden; Studio Museum in Harlem, New York. Some of Maynard’s works are also in the private collections of other renowned artists such as jazz musician Ron Carter; singer/songwriter Stevie Wonder; and author Toni Morrison.

MATERIALS, FORMS, STYLES, INFLUENCES, AND MAJOR THEMES
Valerie Maynard is a versatile, multi-media artist. She freely expresses herself in glass, stone, wood, metal, ceramics, paint, airbrush, collage, printmaking, photography, and set designing. Because she uses art as a language (a means of communication with the world), the medium she chooses to work with at any point in time depends largely on what her message is going to be. Refusing to be pigeonholed, she is constantly critiquing the limitations of conventional artistic boundaries and exploring new materials, forms and ideas. During one of my interviews with her, Maynard said her works, “never finish like they start.” Normally, she will not allow people to see works in progress until they are completed. Frequently she will not give concise answers about her work because, as

---

9 For a photograph of Maynard working in her studio, refer to figure 4.

10 Nzegwu, 8.

11 Maynard, telephone interview with the author, April 2005.
she says, “there are none.” But she likes to hear what others think or have to say about her creations.

Maynard’s early exposure to art and museums coupled with her contemplation of nature, have resulted in a portfolio reflecting multifarious influences. She is constantly influenced by the voices and movements of the “ancient languages”. Humanism is a driving force in most of her works, though she is acutely aware of her ancient roots—her African past, on the other side of the Atlantic.

One of Maynard’s earliest jobs was working with a portrait painter, Elaine Journey at the Elaine Journey Art School in New Rochelle (New York). The experience allowed her to master the skill of capturing the essence of a subject. However, Maynard found that portraiture hampered her self expression and stylistic exploration. On maturing as an artist, she began to stylize her human figures, referring to them as her “folk people.”

These “folk people,” as seen in her Baltimore City College High School Murals (figures 15-17), represent humanity. With no hair or clothes, they cannot be identified with a specific time or space. They are eternal. “Form” in her work is poetic and transcendental.

Maynard’s philosophy as an artist is similar to that of her African ancestors who did not separate art from daily living. This is “art for life’s sake.” In effect, Maynard’s works “speak” to the needs of all people. She uses visual metaphor to mirror the history of Africans and African-Americans. Artistic representation “bears witness” to the things she has seen and heard. Painfully or joyfully, she shares her thoughts with others hoping to change the way people perceive reality. An uncanny ability to always keep people

---

12 Maynard, telephone interview with the author, April 2005.
asking questions is one of the most intriguing aspects of her works. The chapter that follows will attempt to plumb the depth of meaning in her most famous work, *We Are Tied to the Very Beginning* (1969).
Valerie Maynard’s sculpture *We Are Tied to the Very Beginning* (figure 5) captures the spirit of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s and 1970s, when African-Americans organized various public demonstrations to galvanize their struggle for social justice and civil rights. The sculpture consists of a young man’s head mounted on a pedestal and two clenched fists arranged in such a way as to suggest a partly buried figure attempting to liberate himself from the grip of oppression.

To those familiar with the history of the African-American struggle for freedom, this sculpture conveys much more than meets the eye. For it takes us back to the antebellum period when captive Africans as well as members of various abolitionist societies challenged the American Declaration of Independence of July 4, 1776:

> We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.

In his popular “Ethiopian Manifesto” of 1829, the African-American activist, Robert Alexander Young (a free black) drew attention to the contradiction in this Declaration:
No, I am in myself a man, and as a man will live, or as a man will die; for as I was born free of the will allotted to me of the freedom of God….The voice of intuitive justice speaks aloud to you, and bids you to release your slave….13

In short, the inconsistency in the 1776 Declaration is the subject of an engraving created by the free Black artist, Patrick Reason (1816-1898) for the Philadelphia Vigilant (Antislavery) Committee in 1839. It shows a black figure, with his hands in chains, kneeling under the caption: “Am I Not a Man and a Brother?” (figure 1).14 Valerie Maynard’s We Are Tied to the Very Beginning recalls not only that engraving, but also the African-American liberation theology that reads black-specific meanings into certain biblical passages. For example, the term “Ethiopia”, as used in the Bible, refers to the dark-skinned peoples of Africa, rather than to the African nation that bears the name today. Little wonder, free and enslaved Africans of Antebellum America viewed Psalm 68:31—“Princes shall come out of Egypt; Ethiopia shall soon stretch her hands unto God”—as a promise by God to deliver blacks from the indignities of slavery. Hence the word “Ethiopia” appears in Robert Alexander Young’s manifesto of 1829 (quoted above).

This expectation of divine intervention resonates in France Ellen Harper’s poem of 1854, entitled “Ethiopia”:

Yes! Ethiopia yet shall stretch
Her bleeding hands abroad;
Her cry of agony shall reach
The burning throne of God.

The tyrant’s yoke from off her neck,
His fetters from her soul,

---


14 This engraving was influenced by a design created in 1787 by William Hackwood for the English Committee to abolish the Slave Trade. See Patton, 76-77.
The mighty hand of God shall break,
And spurn the base control.

Redeemed from dust and freed from chains,
Her son's shall lift their eyes;
From cloud-capt hills and verdant plains
Shall shouts of triumph rise

Upon her dark, despairing brow,
Shall play a smile of peace;
For God shall bend unto her wo,
And bid her sorrows cease.

'Neath sheltering vines and stately palms
Shall laughing children play,
And aged sires with joyous psalms
Shall gladden every day.

Secure by night, and blest by day,
Shall pass her happy hours;
Nor human tigers hunt for prey
Within her peaceful bowers.

Then, Ethiopia! stretch, oh! Stretch
Thy bleeding hands abroad;
The cry of agony shall reach
And find redress from God.\(^{15}\)

While the open mouth in Maynard's figure may very well indicate a cry of agony, the clenched fists on the other hand, hint at "Ethiopia's" dogged determination to succeed, despite the obstacles ahead. Created in 1921, Meta Warrick Fuller's sculpture entitled \textit{Ethiopia Awakening} (figure 6) reflects this resolve. It is a life-size bronze sculpture of a mummified female figure, representing Mother Africa. Fuller strategically uses this Egyptian image to signify both the grandeur of the African-American ancestral legacy and its contributions to human civilization. Here we see a dead mummy coming

back to life. Just like Robert Alexander Young’s *Ethiopian Manifesto* of 1829, Meta Warrick Fuller’s imagery is a “wake up” call on African-Americans to prepare for the task ahead. According to her, the figure symbolizes the Black American “awakening, gradually unwinding the bandages of the past and looking out in life again, expectant, but unafraid…” Note that the left hand of the figure is moving as though ready for the next phase of the “New Negro” movement in the 1960s, when the clenched fist (as shown in Maynard’s assemblage) would become the most popular symbol of Black Power. I will return to this point later.

**DAWN OF A NEW ERA**

A new era in the African-American quest for freedom and self-determination began shortly after the end of World War II. Black soldiers who participated in the war returned to the United States resolved to liberate themselves and fellow blacks from racial discrimination. As already mentioned, the Supreme Court decision outlawing segregation in American schools emboldened Blacks to challenge other discriminatory laws. In 1955, Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on a segregated bus in Montgomery, Alabama. The crisis that followed forced the state of Alabama to abandon the practice of racial segregation in its mass transit system. By 1957, Reverend Martin Luther King (and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference) had gained national and international attention as an advocate of non-violent resistance against social injustice. In 1963, he organized the “March on Washington”, which attracted thousands of Black and

---

White protestors. In 1964, Congress passed the Civil Rights Bill, banning discrimination in voting, jobs and housing. The assassination of Malcolm X in 1965 shook the black community. In 1966 Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale formed the Black Panther Party for self defense. The assassination of Dr. King in 1968 transformed the Civil Rights Movement into a much more aggressive and militant phenomenon.17

NEW IMPULSES FROM AFRICA

The establishment of the Peace Corps Program in 1961 allowed many African-Americans to visit Africa and have first-hand experience of their heritage. Needless to say, the emergence of many independent African states in the 1960s provided a psychological boost for the Civil Rights struggle in the United States. Apart from encouraging African-Americans to identify more closely with their African heritage, through braids, bushy “Afros” and African dress, this period witnessed the establishment of African and African-American studies programs in many American educational institutions. As Babatunde Lawal puts it, “A deeper knowledge of African aesthetics and iconography [from the 1960s onward] has allowed many African-American artists to adapt them to the black experience in a more creative and meaningful way than their predecessors had done during the Harlem Renaissance [of the 1920s and 1930s].”18 Their work began to take on


an “aesthetic toughness”, which defines and reveals—a characteristic similar to art produced in art of traditional Africa.19

A. The Significance of the Head

Therefore in order to fully understand the emphasis on the head in Maynard’s sculpture We Are Tied to the Very Beginning (figure 5), one must be aware of its significance in African art. The head almost always dominates a typical African figure sculpture “because it is considered the seat of the life force, without which a person cannot exist.”20 Among the people of Yoruba (of West Africa), the head (ori) is “perceived as the seat of the ase (enabling power) that determines one’s identity and existence, influencing behavior and personal destiny….In effect, the head (ori) is the lord of the body and therefore must be acknowledged and given pride of place.”21

The prominence given to the head in African sculptures both in terms of surface elaboration and size underscores its centrality in African religion and politics. For example, Kings frequently double as the political and spiritual heads of their communities.22


The emotions on the face of Maynard's struggling figure can also be related to African symbolism. According to Blier, the distortion of the face is common in Igbo and Yoruba art. In some cultures, it may be used in sculptures and masks to ward off evil forces and thus ensure social and spiritual well-being. In other cultures, a distorted face may signify incompleteness, abnormality, alienation, or marginalization.

It suffices to say that all these African significations come to mind as one contemplates Maynard's *We Are Tied to the Very Beginning* (figure 5). We are also reminded of the term "galut," used in diaspora studies to denote exile or bondage. The open mouth of the figure seems to be saying something. What it is, nobody knows. Maynard herself is reluctant to put words in that mouth. She would rather let the figure speak for itself, or communicate at a different level with those sensitive enough to hear the message.

**B. The Significance of the Clenched Fist**

Maynard's use of the clenched fist motif in this sculpture is equally significant because of its African precedents and African-American reinterpretation/re-contextualization. In view of its various social, cultural, agricultural, military, commercial, spiritual, artistic and other functions, the hand is considered an indispensable part of the body in many African societies. In addition, its gestures constitute a visual language but whose meanings vary from one culture to another.

---


Visual language meanings vary from one culture to another. For instance, among the Dogon, the raised hand is associated with the invocation of the sacred forces. Among the Lega of the Republic of Congo, the same gesture may identify an individual as a *kindi*, a man of peace whose physical presence can stop quarrels or avert troubles. But among the Kongo "the 'raised arms' motif is called *booka* [figure 7], a term that refers to a variety of attitudes, ranging from supplication and proclamation to a state of 'being ecstatic, exultant, joyous, fine' or 'being ready to fly with inherent spirit.""

Yet several African societies differentiate the left from the right hand in the meanings they convey. As Blier notes, exceptions do exist, but generally the right hand is symbolic of the male, while the left is the female. The right hand stands for physical power, and the left for spiritual force; the right for clarity, and the left for secrets. According to her, "like the arm, the hand has important if often contradictory associations. It is the symbol of force, power, autonomy, responsibility." This concept is evident in the Fon sculpture in figure 8. The motif, hand on head, suggests the ability to be something in life. The Fon sculpture purposefully couples two elements (the clenched fist and head) in African culture that demonstrates strength and acclaim.

---


Such is the importance attached to the hand among the Igbo and Benin of Nigeria that an altar figure is dedicated to it. Called *ikenga* (by the Igbo) and *ikegobo* (by the Benin), this altar symbol enables an individual to harness the metaphysical forces of the hand for self-empowerment and for making a headway in life. Note the clenched fist in the Benin altar to the hand (figure 9).31

It is significant to note that this African symbolism seems to have survived the “Middle Passage,” being apparent in the use of outstretched hands as a gesture of worship in the African-American church. Figure 10 features nineteenth century Black worshippers with outstretched hands inside a church at Grafton, New Yorktown, Virginia, during the watch night service on New Year’s Eve, 1879.32 Figure 11 shows an African-American family taking part in a tradition of family prayer in which they raise their arms receiving God’s power in their bodies.33 As Joseph Murphy puts it, “the spirit of the Black Church is the celebrations of God’s ultimate freedom in the body of the congregation. In word, song, music, and movement, the spirit is brought down to become incarnated in the very bodies of the devotees, showing them its power to sustain, heal, and liberate the community.”


In short, Maynard’s use of the hand, in *We Are Tied to the Very Beginning* has two major implications. First, it relates the African-American body politic to its cultural and spiritual roots in Africa. Second, it uses this connection to reinforce the Civil Rights struggle of the 1960s and 1970s during which the raised clenched fist salute (figure 12) became the most popular signature of the Black quest for freedom not only in the United States, but in Africa and the African diaspora as well.
Chapter Four
From Rufus and Strange Fruit to No Apartheid:
Connecting the Two Sides of the Atlantic

As mentioned earlier, stylization enables Maynard to invest the human figure with a presence that transcends the specificity of time and space. As a result, such representations bear messages aimed at appealing to humanity in general, notwithstanding their Black-specific content, which often draws attention to problems facing Black folks on both sides of the Atlantic. This explains the frequent emphasis on the head in most of her images, since the face is a site of identity, perception and communication, a phenomenon already noted in We Are Tied to the Very Beginning. It is also evident in Rufus (figure 13), which Maynard created in the late 1960s.

At that time she was a counselor and teacher at the Art Students League in Braddle, Vermont. She was working in clay, when someone suggested that she might try to carve in stone. Maynard complied. But before beginning to carve, she could see the face on the stone, which she then completed. Rufus was born, a head with a rough, stubborn face, the face of a man whose determination for freedom is unstoppable.

“Rufus” is a generic name. For her, this man or spirit represented “all strong black Americans who would not shut up, sit still... They talked too much....they were incorrigible.” The sculpture signifies “strength of head and knowing beyond place.”

36 Maynard, telephone interview with the author, February 2005.
It is a blend of expression, gesture, and spirituality, elements recurring in African and African-American cultural and artistic practices.

*Rufus* is an abstraction, yet, as Maynard notes “this sculpture always reminds people of someone.” The figure seems to be listening to music, or perhaps humming to himself. Professional jazz and classical musician, Ron Carter, owns a version of *Rufus* and has written music on the image. Singer/songwriter, Stevie Wonder also has his own version of *Rufus*, as well as other works by Maynard.

Just like *We Are Tied to the Very Beginning*, *Rufus* has an unfinished, rough surface, suggesting an individual who has experienced a lot of hard times. He appears to be using music to escape or neutralize the harsh realities of marginalization—frequently highlighted in the blues. As many music historians have noted, the blues stem from a long musical tradition of southern gospel music, slave songs, ring shouts and freedom chants whose roots go back to Africa. Music has long been an outlet for Americans of African descent when trying to cope with the complexities of slavery and racism in a foreign land. The Blues are a “means of personal relaxation and of finding comfort in desolation.”

*Rufus’* face evokes a kind of stubbornness, deliberately used by Maynard to represent those who would do all within their power to resist oppression. The choice of stone for this imagery dovetails with Rufus’ strength of character. The figure seems to be lost in a trance, recalling the tradition of spirit possession that abounds in many African

---

37 Maynard, telephone interview with the author, February 2005.

38 Maynard, telephone interview with the author, April 2005.

and African-American religious traditions. As Albert J. Raboteau puts it, African-American theology reveals "the powerful interweaving of traditional African religious themes with Christianity, the challenge of African-American religion to slavery, and the two-century quest for freedom in that so often centered on African-American churches."\(^{40}\)

Figure 14 shows another work by Maynard entitled *Strange Fruit*. This lino cut, made in 1970, depicts a lynching scene. Flanking the big head are two figures dangling from ropes tied to tree branches. The title has been influenced by the popular poem, *Strange Fruit* written in the 1930s by Abel Meeropol (aka Lewis Allen), a New York schoolteacher and left-wing activist:

Southern trees bear strange fruit,
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root,
Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze,
Strange fruit hanging from poplar trees.

Pastoral scene of the gallant South,
The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth,
Scent of magnolia, sweet and fresh,
Then the sudden smell of burning flesh.

Here is fruit for the crows to pluck,
For the rain to gather, for the wind to suck,
For the sun to rot, for the trees to drop,
Here is a strange and bitter cup.\(^{41}\)


This poem, popularized in the 1950s by the singer Billie Holiday, illuminates a dark period in American history, while at the same time, revealing the horrible ordeals that African-Americans have had to face in their quest for freedom and social justice. What is significant about this linocut is its sight and sound implications. For as one looks at it, the text of the poem *Strange Fruit* comes to mind.\(^2\)

**NO APARTHEID SERIES**

Maynard’s concern for the plight of fellow Blacks on the other side of the Atlantic is epitomized by her *No Apartheid Series* created between the 1980s and the 1990s (figures 19-20). It consists of 250 paintings, focusing on the evils of racial discrimination in South Africa where a White minority dominated the Black majority until 1994 when the political situation was reversed—thanks to the economic sanctions and other pressures brought to bear on the minority regime. Space limitation will not permit an examination of all the images in this series. I will deal with only two examples.

Titled *Get Me Another Heart, This One’s Been Broken Many Times* (1995), the painting seen in figure 19 depicts the body of a traumatized female, symbolizing the oppressive Black collective in South Africa. The sharp nails, keys, and their metals on her body allude to the torture, indignities and other inhumane treatments that South African Blacks had undergone in detention camps for more than three centuries. During this time, the rest of the world looked on with indifference. In some cases, powerful Western nations such as the U.S.A., France, Germany and the former Soviet Union

---

promised to do something but ended up doing nothing, leaving the oppressed with many “broken hearts.”

In *No Apartheid Anywhere* (1995), seen in figure 20, the viewer is confronted with an apparition of images, some represented as marks, all engaged in what looks like an apocalyptic drama, whose ultimate outcome is anybody’s guess.

Most of the paintings in the series are done with acrylic paint on oak tag paper, each measuring about 56” x 36”. By using an airbrush technique, she portrays the impression of a rayograph or photogram, which is an image produced when objects are placed on photographic paper and exposed to light. An inverse collage technique in which the shadow or impression an object makes on paper—rather than the actual object itself—creates the building blocks of each finished piece. Her images recall the sculptural presence of African art, combining protest against institutionalized racism with a celebration of the intricacy of life itself. Her paintings and prints in this series serve as bittersweet elixir for the soul, encouraging meditation, reflection and, ultimately, awareness.

As noted by one scholar, African-Americans use their creative skills to articulate the black “struggle against a world-wide escalation of forces aligned against people of color.” In Maynard’s images, the spray-painted black color ostensibly disputes the

---


44 For an online review of Maynard’s exhibition of her *No Apartheid* series go to www.coastalantiques.com/archives/august2003/ANTshadowandlight.html.

space occupied by the white color of the paper, “similar to the way the racially marginalized actively contest the power of a white oppressor.” Although these compositions are full of striking binaries, they also reflect a conscious harmony. The black and white forms and spaces complement one another, as the metal objects create the figure as well as African motifs. In addition, they explore the interplay of light and shadows, offering spectral images of faces, bodies and communities that exist only through the ghostly interrelation of objects.

Many people have taken notice of this monumental series. Alexis De Veaux describes the series as the voices of those who suffer from racial injustice. According to her, the works are brilliant but disturbing, as they tell the story of resistance against oppression. Toni Morrison, on her point, declares that colors are irrelevant when one looks at the No Apartheid Series, given the emphasis on visual dialogue between Black and White. She likens Maynard’s visual metaphor to a dream. In her words, “The lover is the same as an artist, in that if I love you, I have to make you conscious of the things you don’t see.”

By and large, Maynard’s works relate art to life, most especially the Black experience in African and its diaspora.


47 Nzegwu, 11.

48 Maynard, telephone interview with the author, April 2005.

49 Quote by Toni Morrison, read by Maynard, telephone interview with the author, April 2005.
Conclusion

This thesis has attempted to provide detailed formal and iconographical analyses on specific works by Valerie Maynard, a prominent African-American female artist. Connections were made between the work of Maynard and traditional African art and life. Her art displays an aesthetic toughness and an intrinsic value that reveals concealed meanings.

Valerie Maynard's artistic skills reached a level of maturation during the Black Arts Movement—an era when many African-American artists used visual and performing arts to empower their struggle for freedom. The sixties and seventies marked a time in the United States when Black Americans were reaching back to their African heritage to regain an identity that they had been denied for many years. This period, also known as the Civil Rights Movement, is recognized as a monumental time in American history when African-Americans organized various public demonstrations and spoke out for social justice and civil rights.

The rhetoric, imagery, and spirit of the African-American freedom struggle are evident in the works of Valerie Maynard. Not only do her works chronicle the Black experience in America, but they also reflect an African heritage. *We Are Tied to the Very Beginning*, discussed in chapter three, relates the African-American body politic to its cultural and spiritual roots in Africa. In this analysis, the hand and head were viewed as
motifs derived from African tradition. This connection serves to reinforce the Civil
Rights struggle of the 1960s and 1970s during which the raised clenched fist salute
became the signature for the Black search for freedom. These symbols display themes
detected in the African experience that continues on into the life of the African-
American, testifying to the strength that existed in the slaves of the transatlantic.

Her works Rufus and Strange Fruit (1970), as well as her No Apartheid series
(1980s/90s) discussed in chapter four, display a quality showing the relationship between
art and life, most especially the Black experience in Africa and its diaspora. Through
Rufus and Strange Fruit she makes reference to her African heritage by focusing on the
strength of the head, which is recognized as the seat of knowledge and power. Both
works underscore the hardships that have existed among Blacks in America, while also
emphasizing the use of music and literature as a means to alleviate grief. On the other
hand her No Apartheid series illustrates her concern with the plight of Black people
across the Atlantic as the works symbolize the oppressed of South Africa. The 250
paintings make a statement against worldwide racism towards people of color.

Maynard has worked as a professional artist for the past fifty years. Her
accomplishments are nearly unparalleled in her ability to create art on such a broad scale.
Valerie Maynard’s technical abilities supersede what would be expected of most artists.
She works in media such as wood, ceramic, stone, bronze, oils, acrylic, and many more.
She is known and recognized as a distinguished artist of both the Black Arts Movement
of the sixties, as well as a contemporary artist today, always serving as a spokesperson
for the rights of humanity. Few scholarly publications have been devoted to Maynard,
although she continues to gain attention from the art world. This thesis has endeavored to
fill part of the void that exists in the traditional canon of art history, by giving a critical analysis of Maynard’s work, and inviting the reader to view art through African-American experience.

As an artist, Valerie Maynard serves as a priestess, or spiritual advisor, in that she has the ability to bring the spirit to life through her art. Her works carry along a narrative, a sense of history, derived from her long line of ancestors. Her messages come to life in her works and remind the viewer of origin, salvation, despair, regeneration, and survival. As she enlightens the world with her art, she creates a bridge connecting African-Americans with their African heritage. Maynard strongly proclaims her identity through her works, and is constantly searching for transatlantic freedom, the connection between Africa and North America.
Bibliography
Bibliography


--- telephone interview with the author, March 2004.

--- telephone interview with the author, April 2004.

--- telephone interview with the author, November 2004.

--- telephone interview with the author, February 2005.

--- telephone interview with the author, April 2005.


Illustrations
Figure 1
Patrick Reason
*Am I Not a Man and a Brother*, ca. 1839
Engraving
Collection of the Moorland-Spingam Center, Howard University, Washington D.C.

Figure 2
Mary Edmonia Lewis
*Forever Free*, 1867
Marble
Howard University Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.

Figure 3
Charles White
*Negro Grief*, 1946
Lithograph
Arizona State University Art
Museum Tempe: gift of Dr. and Mrs. Jules Heller

Figure 4
Photograph of Valerie Maynard

Figure 5
Valerie Maynard
*We Are Tied to the Very Beginning*, 1969
Monzini bronze.

Figure 6
Meta Warrick Fuller
*Ethiopia Awakening*, ca. 1921
Plaster

Figure 7
Kongo booka figure
Mboma Kongo dibooondo, Zaire

Figure 8
Fon. Abomey style.
Female Figure, Republic of Benin. (Collected in Lome, Togo).
Wood

Figure 9
Brass altar of the Hand (ikegobo)
[Note: detail of clenched fist]

Made for an eighteenth-century king, Benin
Figure 10
Sketch by Joseph Becker
Worship at an African-American church at Grafton, New Yorktown, Virginia.
New Year's Eve, 1879

Figure 11
Photograph by Roland L. Freeman
Evangelist Sylvia Fletcher and Family

Figure 12
Elizabeth Catlett
*Homage to My Young Black Sisters*, 1968
Red Cedar
Collection of Mr. Andi Owens. Photo: Becket Logan

Figure 13
Valerie Maynard
*Rufus*, 1970
Stone steatite, courtesy of Reginald Jackson

From slide image
Figure 14  
Valerie Maynard  
*Strange Fruit, 1970*  
Linoleum cut

Figure 15
Valerie Maynard
Detail of *Baltimore City College High School Murals*, 1980.
Black Walnut, two panels

Photograph by author
Figure 16
Valerie Maynard
*Baltimore City College High School Murals, 1980*
Black Walnut

Photograph by author
Figure 17
Valerie Maynard
*Baltimore City College High School Murals, 1980*
Black Walnut

Photographs by author
Figure 18
Valerie Maynard
*Get Me Another Heart, This One’s Been Broken Many Times*, from *No Apartheid* series, 1995.
Acrylic paint on oak tag

Figure 19
Valerie Maynard
_No Apartheid Anywhere_ from _No Apartheid_ series, 1995
Painting in three parts, overlapping
Acrylic paint on oak tag

From _Bearing Witness: Contemporary Works by African-American Women Artists_.