

Paintings fulfill a promise to keep Ashley Bryan in Maine

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Ashley Bryan, “#4 White Hollyhocks,” n.d., acrylic on canvas, 32 x 28 in., Bates College Museum of Art, gift of Henry Isaacs and Donna Bartnoff Isaacs *Courtesy of Bates College*

Many years ago, Henry Isaacs made a promise to his friend Ashley Bryan, painter to painter.

“I promised him that we would work really hard to keep his work in the state of Maine,” said Isaacs, who, with his wife Donna Bartnoff Isaacs, made good on that pledge by donating several of Bryan’s paintings and other works of art to the Bates College Museum of Art.

The Isaacs are longtime friends of Bryan from their time together on Little Cranberry Island. Bryan, who is 97 and recently survived COVID-19, is known internationally as an author and illustrator of children’s books, many inspired by African folk tales. He is also an extraordinary painter, and Bates Museum director Dan Mills hopes the Isaacs’ gift will serve as a building block for what might become an Ashley Bryan study center on the Lewiston campus.

“We felt more attention should be given to his paintings. As much as he is recognized for his illustrations, he should be known more and celebrated for his fine art,” Mills said. “We aspire to be a center for Ashley’s work and hope we can build on the collection with a focus on Ashley as an artist. It seems to be a part of his creative output that has not received the attention it could and should, and we would like to help out with that.”

The Isaacs have collected Bryan’s art over several decades. Henry led painting workshops with Bryan for many years, and Donna, a former island educator, featured Bryan as a classroom guest. In a twist, both the Isaacs and Bryan are now living out of state. The Isaacs recently moved back to their home in Vermont, while Bryan went south to Texas last fall to spend the winter with his niece and her family, as has been his custom in recent years. He’s been there since. It is the first year since he moved to Maine full time in the 1987 after retiring from Dartmouth College that he hasn’t spent at least part of it on the island, said his nephew, George Campbell of New York.

“Maine is his joy. He loves being there. Except for the time teaching at Dartmouth, I don’t think he has ever spent the whole year away from the island. That is his whole life, especially the summer months,” Campbell said.



Ashley Bryan, “#1 Dahlias,” n.d., acrylic on canvas, 33 5/8 x 25 1/2 in., Bates College Museum of Art, gift of Henry Isaacs and Donna Bartnoff Isaacs

Bryan became sick with COVID-19 in late spring and early summer, and recovered quickly, his nephew said. “Ashley will remain in Houston until spring of 2021 and, then, return to Islesford if all goes well. ... He looks forward to his return and to getting back into his studio to work.”

In response to the pandemic, Bryan painted a piece, “Painting on the Patio,” and said that “although the pandemic was a terrible setback for all, he must go on doing what he must do,” his nephew said.

“Of course he is tremendously excited about the many happenings in the state of Maine honoring him and his contribution to art,” his nephew wrote in an email, expressing his uncle’s sentiments because Bryan was not up for an interview. “He is especially thrilled with the venture of the Bates College Museum presenting his work to the public. He feels that this will be a way of further introducing his work to the people of Maine and visitors in the country. He also feels that it will ‘be an inspiration to students of art as well as those interested in art.’ He is very grateful to his ‘good and faithful friends’ Henry and Donna Isaacs who have been very supportive of his work ‘forever.’ He and Henry have spent many years sharing their views and taking time out of their lives to provide classes for budding artists who participated in their plein-air classes on Islesford. He misses those times and he misses spending time with Henry.”

The gift to Bates comprises 53 pieces of art, including paintings, drawings and prints, as well as copies of Bryan’s books, and posters. While the Bates campus remains closed to the public because of the pandemic, this week the museum will open an exhibition drawn mostly from the Isaacs’ gift called “Let’s Celebrate Ashley Bryan!” It will have many virtual components, so people not allowed on the Bates campus can view it and participate. The first of those online opportunities comes at 6 p.m. Thursday, when poet Nikki Giovanni, one of Bryan’s friends and collaborators, discusses his life and work on a Zoom lecture that is open to the public for free.

Beyond his tangible creations, Bryan is also celebrated for his persistent optimism and positive nature, which is something that Mills has come to cherish during a series of phone calls with Bryan in preparation for the exhibition. These days, the outside world is often bleak and challenging, Mills said, but the conversations with Bryan are a balm. “They are brief conversations, but they are joyous,” Mills said. “He is so ebullient in his positive views of the world and his expression of love and appreciation for



Ashley Bryan, “Cannot Reach it Yet,” 1980s, acrylic on canvas, 48 x 36 in., Bates College Museum of Art, gift of Henry Isaacs and Donna Bartnoff Isaacs

people who are working on this show. It's hard to interact with him and not feel joy." Henry Isaacs said the timing of the gift was motivated in part by the couple's recent move back to Vermont, where they have long had a home. "We started unpacking things from three houses and three studios, and I realized that I had used and enjoyed all of this work for 40-plus years and that we could accomplish something by putting this collection together and donating it," he said.

In addition to the paintings and other pieces of art by Bryan, the gift includes a small selection of work by Anthony Gross, a British printmaker and painter whom Isaacs befriended when he lived and taught in England in 1970s. Both Bryan and Gross were teachers and mentors whose influence can be seen in Isaacs' paintings today. He said he wanted to keep the work of the two artists together because both men overcame personal odds to achieve artistic greatness, Gross as a Jewish artist working artist in France "where he was always the odd man out" and Bryan as a Black artist in America. Both served in World War II, and both participated in D-Day. "It was important to me to keep these two bodies of work together and accessible to young artists. They helped me, and I want other artists to have the opportunities I had," he said.

It was especially important to keep Bryan's paintings in Maine, where his influence on other artists stretches back decades. Born in Harlem and raised in the Bronx, Bryan first came to Maine in 1946 as a student at the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture. He visited Little Cranberry that summer, and has lived on the island since retiring from Dartmouth College in the 1980s.

Early in 2019, the Ashley Bryan Center on Little Cranberry Island donated the artist's personal papers, including the bulk of Bryan's letters, correspondence, books, poetry, drawings, as well as watercolors and paintings that were in his island home, to the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia. By donating their paintings to Bates, the Isaacs ensure some of Bryan's art will remain in the place where he made it and that attention will be paid to Bryan's fine-art skills.

Campbell said that over the next few months the Ashley Bryan Center will give other pieces of art to Bates, as well as the Bowdoin and Colby museums, the Portland Museum of the Art and the Farnsworth Art Museum, with the bulk of his puppets going to the College of the Atlantic. "In this way, many of the prominent institutions in Maine will benefit and ensure the support of his legacy in his home state," Campbell said.

Henry Isaacs called it a "great error" that people in Maine haven't had the chance to see Bryan's paintings very often. Part of the reason is that Bryan wasn't interested in the commercial aspects of the gallery world, Isaacs said. "He made peace with the book world, but he never made peace with the gallery world, the commercial world and the money world of the art scene."

As a result, most exhibitions tend to focus on his illustrations and books. He has illustrated more than 50 children's books and won numerous awards and honors, including the Coretta Scott King-Virginia Hamilton Lifetime Achievement Award, Laura Ingalls Wilder Medal and the New York Public Library's Literary Lions award. The Isaacs hope their gift and exhibition will begin a process of bringing attention to Bryan's paintings and his influence as a painter.

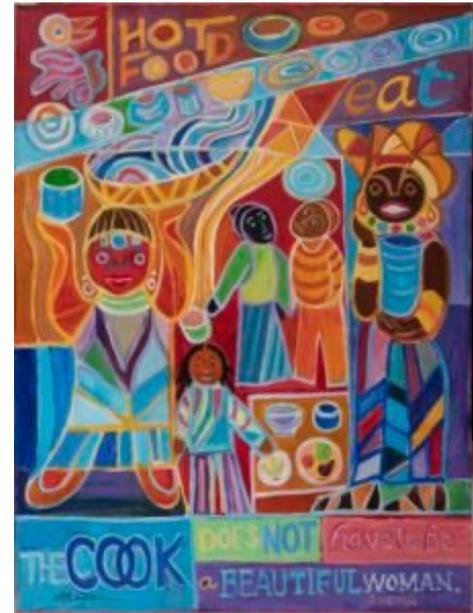
"In my conversations with Ashley, he always identified himself as a painter, and a painter to him encompasses everything," Henry Isaacs said. "He sometimes will draw, sometimes he will make cutouts and sometimes he will write poems, but a painter is everything – and that means everything in art. Sometimes he is a painter with words and sometimes he is a painter with paint, but he is always a painter first."

Henry Isaacs met Bryan nearly 45 years ago and has been collecting his paintings since. The paintings in the collection include representational pieces of family and friends, colorful florals from his island gardens and images that he painted while abroad. There are linocuts of family dinners and kaleidoscopic cityscapes from New York. Among the paintings are two that Bryan painted when he returned to New York to visit his dying sister. He painted cityscapes of Roosevelt Island and a large arch, perhaps inspired by Penn Station. The paintings include words he heard his sister saying from her hospital bed: "At last," "Hurry up" "Wait now."

The Isaacs bought the paintings in honor of Bryan's sister and hung them in their island home. "He didn't want to live with those paintings," Donna Isaacs said. "They represented a very difficult time for him. Ashley would come over to our house a lot for dinner and he would sit down in the arm chair and just look at them, and stare at them, and say, 'These paintings are fabulous. I don't know how I did them.' He really respected those paintings and he was positive he could never do them again."

The collection also includes a few personal gifts. One is a handmade book of a song-poem that Bryan created and presented to the Isaacs by performance. "He was very ceremonious and serious, and then he sang it to us. It was so beautiful and so special," Donna Isaacs said.

The rub of the Bates exhibition is that relatively few people will be able to experience it in person. The museum will unveil a series of online components that will help people engage



Ashley Bryan, "The Cook Does Not Have To Be A Beautiful Woman," n.d., acrylic on canvas, 48 x 36 in., From the Collection of Merry White

with the work, Mills said. In addition to the talk with Gionvanni on Thursday, the museum is working with midcoast photographer and videographer David Clough to present a virtual walk-through of the exhibition, there's an Ashley Bryan Story Time Challenge where kids and adults are challenged to make videos reading Bryan's books and send them to the museum for posting. On campus, the museum also will screen the movie "I Know A Man ...Ashley Bryan" by Maine filmmaker Richard Kane.

There will be more to come, Mills said. "This will clearly not be the last exhibition we will mount of Ashley's work," Mills said. "We are just getting started."

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