

# Canada's Gift: The Art of Artis Lane

by

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A venerated and accomplished African American artist in Los Angeles—and in the United States—is actually an Afro-Canadian. Artis Lane is one of the most distinguished sculptors, painters, and printmakers working in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. Throughout her many decades of outstanding artistic production, she has won numerous awards, has exhibited nationally and internationally, and has created works in many public settings. She has been an inspirational figure to generations of younger artists of all racial and ethnic backgrounds and has continued an astounding level of productivity well into her eighties.

Born Artis Marie Shreve in 1927 in an all-Black village in North Buxton, in southern Ontario, Canada, Lane is the descendant of Southern slaves who fled to Canada through the Underground Railroad, making North Buxton a village populated primarily of transplanted refugees from U.S. enslavement. She is the direct descendant of famed abolitionist and educator Mary Ann Shadd, who became the first woman Canadian publisher. She moved with her family to Ann Arbor, Michigan in early childhood. In a pattern that reflects the story of most accomplished artists, she began to show strong talent in childhood, painting portraits of her classmates and creating other striking artworks. Her family was supportive of her artistic efforts, a valuable (but far from universal) catalyst for her ultimate professional success as a visual artist. She has made art, with increasing sophistication and public recognition, for eighty years, perhaps rivaling only Pablo Picasso for creative longevity.

After high school, she attended the Ontario College of Art on a scholarship. She moved back and forth from Ontario to Detroit in the summer in order to earn money for her educational expenses. In Detroit, she met her first husband, journalist and activist Bill Lane. That relationship caused her to transfer to Cranbrook Academy in Bloomfield, Michigan, so that she and her new husband could remain together. Cranbrook was (and remains) an elite art school and initially approved her portfolio but denied her admission, reinforcing the tragically long tradition of racism in American art education. After pressure from the Urban League, she was finally admitted.

Throughout her training, she absorbed the traditional European tradition of painting and sculpture and her work reveals an exceptional level of formal excellence. She has always fully understood her African origins and many of her works reflect her pride in her Blackness. Like many distinguished Black artists, Lane successfully synthesizes Western artistic form with her highly developed personal style, especially in her three-dimensional works, reflecting her identity as a Black woman committed to the domestic and international struggles of her people.

Life at Cranbrook was not easy for a talented Black female artist, reflecting further the insidious fusion of racism and sexism of the earlier admission denial. Some of her still lifes were sabotaged and she recalls, many decades later, the deep-seated prejudices of some of her fellow students, including the all too common use of the racist slur “nigger.” Like many African Americans, including people of her generation, her recollections of those moments are sharp and precise. And although she has never forgotten those incidents, she has effectively risen against them through a lifetime of extraordinary artistic creativity.

From her early career on, Artis Lane has achieved enormous distinction as a portraitist. As a young married woman and mother in Detroit, she helped support her family by painting portraits of some of the elite figures of Michigan political and industrial life. Over the years, she has used both paintings and sculptures to produce portraits of leading figures in politics, entertainment, and the arts, as well as major luminaries in African American history and culture.

Her exemplary record in this genre is rooted in a long tradition of African American portraiture. One of the first well recognized African American visual artists, Joshua Johnston, painted his white patrons but also created some works of Black subjects during his career. Another Afro-Canadian artist, Edward Bannister, although primarily known for his 19<sup>th</sup> century landscapes, also achieved distinction for his portraits and some of his works bear resemblance to the efforts of Artis Lane.

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, Henry Ossawa Tanner was the first African American visual artist to achieve major international acclaim. Tanner’s commitment to his racial heritage, his consummate skill as an artist, his profound dedication to his religious beliefs, and his prominence as a portraitist all invites close comparison to the life and works of Artis Lane. Another prominent African American artist who worked for many decades until her death in 1998 was Lois Mailou Jones. Her portraits of both white and black figures likewise form the deeper tradition from which Lane’s work emerges.

Lane's portraits constitute one dimension of her multifaceted artistic vision. The other two are social injustice and spirituality, which she labels metaphysical. All these realms are closely linked and reflect a unique artistic consciousness. Many of her portraits express the social perspective that pervades her life and work as well as those of hundreds of other African American artists.



“The Beginning” (Figure 1)

One of her recurring portrait subjects was her longtime friend, the iconic Rosa Parks. One of Lane's most powerful efforts is entitled “The Beginning” (Figure 1), a large edition lithograph that contains both the artist's and Ms. Parks's original signatures. It features a young Rosa Parks on the historic day of December 1, 1955 when she refused to move to the back of the bus in Montgomery, Alabama—a momentous act that catalyzed the Montgomery Bus Boycott that began the modern civil rights movement. The artist's original painting, from which this print derives, hangs in the Rosa Parks Museum in Montgomery, a fitting locale for one of the major socially conscious artworks of the contemporary era.

Viewers are reminded of Rosa Parks's quiet dignity and her firm determination to resist the humiliation of Jim Crow. Lane's portrait emphasizes her subject's facial expression, drawing close attention to Rosa Parks's strong features that signify the entire civil rights crusade that followed in her wake. The lithograph also belies the absurd tale that too many teachers, even now, tell their young pupils: that Rosa Parks was a tired old seamstress who simply was too exhausted to move to the rear when asked by the driver. This powerful work instead should encourage audiences to investigate the actual reality underlying Ms. Parks's courageous act. She had long been a civil rights activist and her defiant act, at the relatively young age of 42, was merely one further step in a magnificent life in pursuit of social justice and racial dignity.

Artis Lane has also produced several other images of Rosa Parks. Particularly striking is a pastel and oil portrait of a young Rosa Parks that shows the vibrancy that pervaded her entire life. She also created several portraits in sculptural form. A dramatic example is found in the Smithsonian Portrait gallery in Washington, D.C. At Troy State University in Montgomery, Alabama, Lane was commissioned to produce a 12-foot, three-panel installation that revealed the life of Rosa Parks. And in 1999, Lane designed the Congressional Gold Medal of Honor for Rosa Parks that President Bill Clinton presented to her, with a huge attendance of Congressional and civil rights leaders present.



Dorothy Height (Figure 2)

Throughout her career, Lane has also made sculptural portraits of other civil rights icons, some of whom are unfortunately not as well known to the general public as they should be. Two examples are companion pieces that the National Council of Negro Women commissioned for display in their Washington D.C. office. One is Dorothy Height (Figure 2), a monumental figure of 20<sup>th</sup> century African American history. She served as president of this organization from 1957 to 1998, after which she became Chair and President Emeritus.

Those positions only scratch the surface of her lifelong accomplishments. Beyond her amazing number of honors and awards, Dorothy Height was a giant force for African American and women's rights throughout her long life. Well before the start of the modern civil rights movement, she worked assiduously to advance the welfare of Black women, including the integration of the YMCA in 1946. She also became one of the central figures of the civil rights movement, joining the more familiar male leaders in a variety of campaigns, including the historic March on Washington in 1963. At her death at 98 in 2010, President Barack Obama attended her funeral at the National Cathedral and ordered flags flown at half-mast.

Artis Lane's three-dimensional portrait, in its ideal setting, is a permanent reminder of Height's stunning lifetime accomplishments for social justice. Like so many other Black artists, Lane employs her talents for multiple objectives, fully understanding that artwork combines both aesthetic and educational dimensions. Visitors to the building can admire the work and use it as a stimulus to learn more about the woman herself. In the process, they help bridge the continuing gender gap in the historical recognition of the giant figures of American equal opportunity. Those who pursue that task, however modestly, take full advantage of Artis Lane's deepest commitment as a visual artist.



Mary McLeod Bethune (Figure 3)

The companion sculptural work in the same location is a bronze portrait of Mary McLeod Bethune (Figure 3), another stellar but insufficiently acknowledged leader in 20<sup>th</sup> century African American history. This work, produced with her customary rigor and formal excellence, augments Lane's artistic homage to African American women of historical accomplishment. It represents another example of her commitment to use her art to supplement the inadequate education that Americans of all racial backgrounds generally receive.

"Mary McLeod Bethune" celebrates one of the most important Black women of the early and mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. Bethune was an educator and civil rights activist who became nationally prominent after working on the presidential campaign of Franklin Roosevelt in 1932. He invited her to serve in the "Black Cabinet," where she vigorously championed the interests of African Americans, aided through her friendship with First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt. Throughout her life, she was extremely committed to civil rights and was involved with the National Council of Negro Women that she founded and the NAACP. Many accomplished African American artists have created portraits in various mediums of Bethune over the years. Lane's extraordinarily realistic sculpture ranks among the most compelling of these efforts, inviting viewers in this venue to explore Bethune's magnificent life and work.

Artis Lane has focused extensively on women subjects during her long artistic career. In 2009, she installed a large bronze sculptural bust, 37 inches high, of Sojourner Truth in Emancipation Hall of the United States Capitol Visitors Center in DC. First Lady Michelle Obama unveiled the artwork before an extremely appreciate audience. This majestic work shows the former slave and renowned abolitionist and women's rights advocate in the shawl and cap that has made her known to generations of Americans. Like many of her other artworks, this efforts is publicly available and is especially appropriate in a setting where thousands of tourists from the U.S. and foreign lands visit each year.

Lane has not neglected the men who have also played powerful roles in the liberation of their people and in historic struggles for dignity and justice in America and elsewhere in 1987; for example, she painted a portrait of Detroit Mayor Coleman Young, one of the most progressive figures in American political life in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This life-sized painting, owned by the City of Detroit and displayed in its Cobo Conference Exhibition Center, depicts a dapper Mayor Young with his powerful personality. It also reveals the strikingly multifaceted artistic talent of Artis Lane, who also created two sculptural busts of Coleman Young.



Nelson Mandela (Figure 4)



Working in oil and pastel on paper, she created a portrait of Nelson Mandela (Figure 4) during his historic term as the first Black president of South Africa. Lane and her late husband Vince Cannon were among the founding members of the Artists for a New South Africa (originally Artists for a Free South Africa), joining such luminaries as Samuel Jackson, CCH Pounder, Blair Underwood, Danny Glover, Alfre Woodard, Desmond Tutu, Hugh Masekela, and many others. This organization was established to support the anti-apartheid efforts of Mandela and his comrades and to mobilize the cultural and artistic community in that struggle. After the end of apartheid and Mandela's election as president, it shifted its focus to domestic problems in South Africa, especially on combatting the HIV/AIDS epidemic there.

This painting adds to the innumerable other portraits of the iconic South African revolutionary leader and statesman, created by artists throughout the world. It shows him in a pensive moment, contemplating both his successes in moving his native land from an outlaw racist country to a new multiracial society and pondering the awesome challenges facing the fledgling democratic state. Lane captures the complexities of Mandela's task in her depiction of his expression. The painting reveals a nuance and complexity to Mandela usually missing in official celebrations about his life, especially since his death in 2013. Once again, Lane's artistry adds depth to public educational consciousness and understanding.

The third level of Artis Lane's work involves her metaphysical dimension. This feature is central to her life, including her professional efforts as an artist. She is profoundly committed to her Christian Science faith and she believes in humanity's ability to transcend its limitations of the flesh. Womanhood and manhood are part of a more comprehensive spiritual entity that becomes the powerful foundation of one of the most spectacular features of her entire body of sculptural work.

Lane uses her work to show the inextricable linkage of the material and the spiritual. Her "emerging" series is unique in contemporary sculpture. She includes casting and firing elements in the final artistic product. By retaining the foundry workings, including the ceramic shell mold, she conveys her belief that generic man and woman emerge out of material thinking into a state of spiritual consciousness.





“Emerging Birth” (Figure 5)

One of the most compelling examples of Artis Lane’s emerging series is “Emerging Birth” (Figure 5), which exemplifies the emergence of new life and the ultimate movement towards spiritual growth and the deeper understanding that represents the transcendence she seeks. This small-scale effort (9 x 8 x 8 inches) of bronze, ceramic shell and resin depicts a woman giving birth; at one level, it honors women for their fertility and reproductive power. Accordingly, it reinforces Lane’s status as an iconic contemporary woman artist by explicitly focusing on the childbirth experience.

At a deeper level, “Emerging Birth” metaphorically suggests that the birthing process is much more universal, encompassing women and men alike. It signifies the presence of new life and therefore new possibilities, including the development of a spiritual transcendence that will allow humans to reach a heightened state of development. This specific sculptural technique that retains foundry elements—the birthing materials of the foundry itself—indicates that this process is incomplete and that the evolution towards higher spiritual consciousness is continuing and transitional. That evolution is likewise part of Lane’s own lifelong journey.



“Emerging Africa” (Figure 6)

Many of her other emerging sculptural works are larger in scale and depict both women and men and diverse themes, including dancers, warriors, and athletes. These efforts have been widely exhibited and critically acclaimed for more than a quarter century. One of her most intriguing sculptures is “Emerging Africa” (Figure 6), which uses the same technique and successfully combines her social and spiritual visions.

Once again, Lane retains extensive foundry materials in the completed product. Here, the subject matter is Africa, truly an emerging continent after centuries of brutal exploitation by European colonialism and a vast array of natural and human disasters. Even now, in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, Africa is beset with complex political, economic, social, public health, physical, military, and other serious challenges. But millions of Africans are indeed emerging and even thriving despite the barriers they face. Lane’s artwork calls attention to their resilience and suggests that they have the will to succeed, both materially and spiritually. But as the two parts of the work reveal, moving from left to right, this process will take time, not unlike the more individual movement into spiritual transcendence that many of her other emerging sculptures express.

“Emerging Africa” also allows Artis Lane to join a larger tradition of African American artists for more than a century who have incorporated Africa and African themes into their work. While acknowledging the profound significance of European artistic influences, many Black artists have looked to Africa as a key source of creative inspiration. Many others have seen Africa as a crucial linkage to their own identity and have used their own artworks to establish the connection between their own identity and the lives of their ancestors.

This feature of African American visual arts is unique in contemporary art. It is an admirable reflection of Black pride and dignity in a society that often works to repress such expressions among its racial and ethnic minorities—and especially among its almost 40 million residents of African descent. In this work, Canadian-born Artis Lane also pays tribute to her more distant homeland. Furthermore, like many of her artistic colleagues, she encourages viewers of all races and ethnicities, especially in the United States, to pay greater attention to the African continent.

Artis Lane remains extremely active well into her ninth decade. Beyond her artistic productivity, she has been a vibrant force in the African American creative community in Southern California. When the California African American Museum in Los Angeles mounted a retrospective exhibition entitled “A Woman’s Journey: The Life and Work of Artis Lane” in 2007/2008 and subsequently honored her with its Lifetime Achievement Award, these were merely a few of many such recognitions of her achievements over the decades. She is a constant presence at the openings of her artistic colleagues in the region. As one of the honored “elders,” she provides encouragement and support for the younger African American artists who strive to use their own talents to express visions of social, ethical, and spiritual importance. She is, in short, a force of nature whose life and work have graced both her native Canada and her adopted United States.