

# As seen in THE MONTCLAIR TIMES Community

Thursday, January 28, 2010

## Philanthropist lives on in the art of those he helped

BY ELIZABETH OGUSS  
OF THE MONTCLAIR TIMES

For generations, the big names in American philanthropy have been household words: Carnegie, Rockefeller, Rosenwald.

Rosenwald?

Not a household word, true. But without the philanthropy of Julius Rosenwald, these names might not have become familiar to us as the great artists they were: Marian Anderson, Zora Neale Hurston, Gordon Parks, W.E.B. DuBois, Katherine Dunham, Langston Hughes, Ralph Ellison, Jacob Lawrence, Haywood Bill Rivers, Woody Guthrie, and Hale Woodruff.

In the first half of the 20th century, all were rising young artists, dancers, writers, or intellectuals assisted by the Julius Rosenwald Fund, which was established in 1917.

The work of the visual artists aided by Rosenwald's legacy will be on exhibit in a new show at the Montclair Art Museum.

"A Force for Change: African American Art and the Julius Rosenwald Fund," opens on Feb. 7. It was organized by the Spertus Museum in Chicago and traveled to the Allentown Art Museum before coming to MAM.

Rosenwald, born in 1862, was a Chicago businessman who in the early 1900s

began to amass a fortune as CEO of Sears, Roebuck. Like other philanthropists of his day, he wanted to use his wealth to improve society.

But unlike them, he designed his charity to "spend itself out of existence," according to Daniel Schulman, curator of the exhibition. When the Rosenwald Fund ended in 1948, its founder's name faded from prominence.

"[Rosenwald's philosophy] made him unusual, if not unique, in the history of American philanthropy," Schulman told *The Times*. "He felt very strongly that concentrating on perpetuating wealth was a bad idea and not a modern idea, and that charitable foundations should focus on spending money, not accruing it."

Rosenwald had originally supported Jewish charities. But when he read Booker T. Washington's "Up From Slavery," and then met the author, he began giving to black causes, particularly to education.

By 1932, he had given the seed money for more than 5,000 black schools in the South, which became known as Rosenwald schools.

In 1927, the Fund began giving fellowships to African-American scholars, intellectuals, and artists. Rosenwald and Edwin Embree, who oversaw the selection process, wanted to give black intellectuals "some freedom to develop," Schulman said. But there were barriers to be broken too.

"African-Americans could attend prominent Northern research universities," Schulman said, "but the idea of African-American faculty was beyond anyone's ambition."

Rosenwald Fellows went on to become tenured professors at Penn, Chicago, and other universities. One 1942 Fellow, David Watson Daly Dickson, later became president of Montclair State College.

Hundreds applied for the fellowships. Each application was rigorously evaluated by a jury in the applicant's discipline.

"The fund didn't have an agenda other than to support artists and intellectuals who were interested in the issue of race and in the South and most of whom were black," Schulman said. "Within those broad parameters they didn't have an ax to grind. They were very liberal in their expectations."

"A Force for Change" covers the Roaring 20s through the Depression and the Second World War, a time that saw huge social change, including the migration of blacks from the South to Northern cities, primarily New York and Chicago.

"I think the very idea that there was a cultural contribution made by blacks in the U.S. was a shocking idea to the mainstream, at that early point," Schulman said.

The Rosenwald Fellowships gave those artists the freedom and security to become leading artists of their time.

"It helps us to look at that history again," Schulman said.

The exhibit "A Force for Change" includes more than 60 paintings, sculptures, and works on paper by 22 Rosenwald Fellows. It also includes video of Pearl Primus and Katherine Dunham, two dancers, and a short documentary film about Rosenwald.

MAM's chief curator, Gail Stavitsky, is pleased that "A Force for Change" gives MAM a chance to show works in its own collection that aren't usually on display.

"Exploring Identities: African American Works from the Collection," curated by Stavitsky, will show work by contemporary artists including Montclair's own Janet Taylor Pickett, as well as Carrie Mae Weems, Lorna Simpson, Whitfield Lovell, Willie Cole, and others.

In addition, the work of sculptor and printmaker Martin Puryear will be on display in a show of 13 selections from the JPMorgan Chase Art Collection, most of them woodcuts made for an edition of Jean Toomer's 1922 novel, "Cane."


To MAM director Lora Urbanelli, "A Force for Change" is the perfect show to succeed the museum's wildly successful Cézanne exhibition, which closed on Jan. 3, because like that show, it combines a "smart, high-level exhibition" with great popular appeal.

"It looks at a group of African-American artists who have become the ones we look to, the canon of great 20th-century African-American artists," Urbanelli said. "In that sense, the show has a real popular appeal."

"Yet — something new and different — it talks a lot about the power of philanthropy, because these artists were only able to achieve the visibility they achieved because of the Fund."



Left, "Ezekiel Saw the Wheel," 1942, oil and tempera on canvas, by Lamar Baker (1908-94). Above, "American Gothic, Washington, D.C.," 1942 gelatin silver print, by Gordon Parks (1912-2006).

 **Montclair Art Museum**  
3 South Mountain Avenue, Montclair, NJ  
(973) 746-5555, [montclairartmuseum.org](http://montclairartmuseum.org)