

FREEING ART

THE SCULPTURE OF LESLIE GARLAND BOLLING

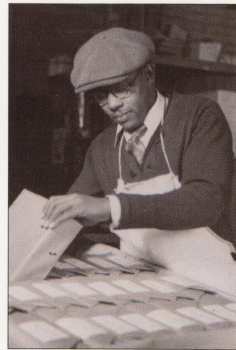
FROM WOOD

AT THE LIBRARY OF VIRGINIA
JULY 24-OCTOBER 21, 2006

FEW THINGS THIS SIDE OF HEAVEN GIVE ME THE JOY THAT CARVING DOES

LESLIE GARLAND BOLLING (1898–1955) captured the attention and imagination of the art public from 1926 to 1943 with more than eighty portrait busts and sculptures of working people and nude figures. He faced obstacles: he was African American, he was self-taught, and he lived in the segregated South. Legislated segregation throughout the South limited the region's African Americans economically and socially. In Richmond, Virginia, where Bolling lived, the African American community developed into a vibrant center of activity that drew on business and economic connections with Harlem in New York City. This community offered moral support for Bolling, and the progressive white communities in Richmond and in New York provided financial support.

Born in Dendron, Surry County, Virginia, on 16 September 1898, Bolling studied at Hampton Institute (now Hampton University) and Virginia Union University. He lived in Richmond after 1920, working as a porter, handyman, and postal clerk. He married Julia V. Lightner, a seamstress and a widow five years his senior, on 27 May 1928. She died on 14 June 1943. Bolling married Ethelyn M. Bailey, a woman about ten years his junior who worked as a maid, on 16 October 1948. Neither marriage produced children. On 27 September 1955 Bolling died in New York City. He was buried at Woodland Cemetery in Richmond.



Bolling recalled that, as a child, he spent his spare time learning to draw by copying pictures. By 1926 he was beginning to carve figures and exhibit them locally. Three Richmond men—Hunter T. Stagg, Berkeley Williams, and William Young—brought his work to the attention of Carl Van Vechten, a New York writer and photographer deeply involved in the Harlem Renaissance. Van Vechten acted as Bolling's agent in New York and sold several of Bolling's sculptures. Perhaps at the urging of Van Vechten, from 1933 to 1943 Bolling sent his work regularly to exhibitions sponsored by the Harmon Foundation, a New York philanthropic organization established in 1922.

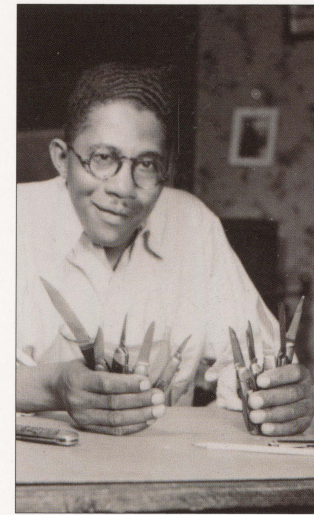


These exhibitions were designed to offer a venue for African American artists to show their work to a broader public, to stimulate their creativity, and to encourage the public to support them by purchasing their works. Bolling's work was exhibited with that of Richmond Barthé, Sargent Johnson, Elizabeth Prophet, Augusta Savage, and other leading African American sculptors who had studied formally and whose work was critically acclaimed.

In 1935 Bolling received the distinction of being the first African American in Virginia to have a one-man exhibition. One of the more than 2,500 people who visited the exhibition was Thomas Hart Benton, a nationally renowned artist who was in Richmond to lecture on mural painting. Benton singled out Bolling's work as giving a reason why Richmonders should support their local artists. Bolling's sculptures, he stated, "show real merit, and a new kind of form."

Bolling had a second one-man exhibition in June 1937 at the William D. Cox Gallery in New York City. Both Alain Locke and James A. Porter included Bolling in their published surveys of African American art. In his 1940 book, *Design and Figure Carving*, E. J. Tangerman discussed Bolling at length and included illustrations of his works as examples of American folk carving. Nevertheless, despite his critical success in national exhibitions and sale of sculptures to patrons in New York and Richmond, Bolling never realized much economic gain through his art.

In the 1920s and 1930s African American artists and writers debated about what was appropriate subject matter as well as the stylistic direction of their art.

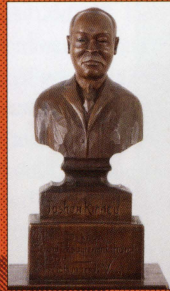


Some black critics worried that African American artists had already absorbed too much of European aesthetics and argued that the artists needed to look to African art as inspiration. Alain Locke, a leading figure in the New Negro movement centered in Harlem, urged African American artists to challenge the prevailing view of American blacks as depicted in art and literature created by American whites, and to broaden their culture to develop racial pride. James A. Porter, an artist and teacher at Howard University, suggested that black artists focus their attention on facets of African American life that had been largely ignored by white artists.

The extent to which Bolling was aware of or participated in this intellectual and critical debate is unclear, although his sculptures confronted prevailing black stereotypes. Bolling depicted African Americans working at their daily jobs or enjoying a moment of leisure, and his nude figures emphasize the beauty of the human form. The sculptures demonstrate an easy naturalism in their gestures and movement. Critics applauded what they perceived as the lack of symbolism and sentimentality in the sculptures and appreciated his mastery of wood-carving techniques.

Bolling's sculptures occupy a unique position in the artworks created by African Americans in the 1930s and early in the 1940s. Bolling's work confounded some art professionals. When a curator at the Baltimore Museum of Art rejected his work as "applied art," Bolling argued that his work was "fine art" or "art which has no use, save its esthetic value and beauty, the size of the work has nothing to do with whether it's applied or fine arts." Working in small scale and in wood, Bolling created figures that transcend the arbitrary distinctions between "folk"

and "fine" art by combining a keen observation of the human figure and realistic portrayals of the culture of Richmond's African Americans.



Images courtesy of the Harmon Foundation, Collection H, 1922-1967, NARA, Special Media Archives Services Division, College Park, Maryland. Except images below (l-r) by Pierre Courtois, Fred Pfaff, James Cawthorne/Camera One, and Pierre Courtois. Female sculpture on front by Suzanne van Bylevelt.



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