

MODERN ART COLLECTION

Hale Aspacio Woodruff

The Art of the Negro: Native Forms (study)

1950

Oil on canvas

23 × 21 in. (58.4 × 53.3 cm)

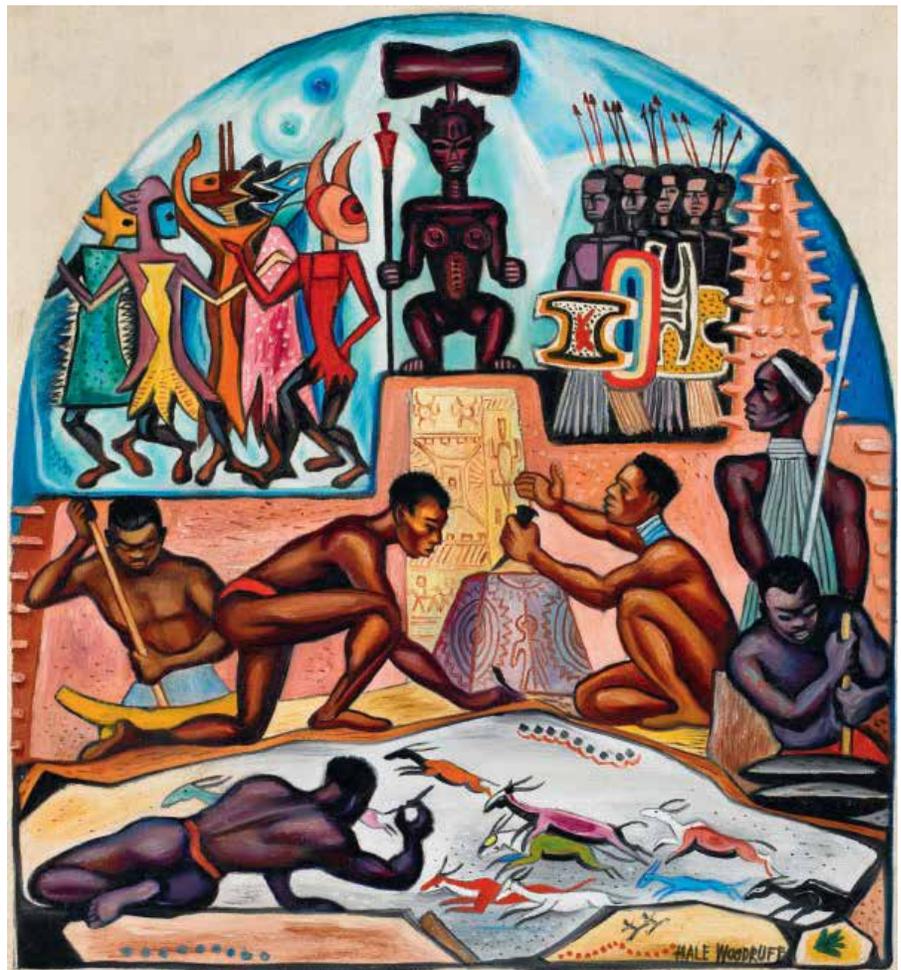
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2005.17

A pioneering artist and educator, Hale Woodruff is best known for his mural series on the Amistad slave ship mutiny of 1839, executed for Talladega College in Alabama, and his *Art of the Negro* series at Atlanta University (now Clark Atlanta University) in Georgia. Still in its original location in the rotunda of Clark Atlanta University's Trevor Arnett Library, Woodruff's *Art of the Negro* series comprises six canvases celebrating African art as a major influence on twentieth-century aesthetic production. *Native Forms* is a study for the first canvas in the series.

Completed in 1939, the Amistad mural series in the Savery Library at Talladega College is painted in a regionalist style with naturalistic forms, strong outlines, and bold color, and owes much to the Mexican muralist Diego Rivera, with whom Woodruff studied in 1936. The *Art of the Negro* series, on the other hand, shows Woodruff's interest in European modernism and incorporates elements borrowed from cubism as well as references to African art. On the border between abstraction and figuration, the six compositions in the series respond to a shift in Woodruff's style in the mid-1940s toward greater abstraction.

Born in Cairo, Illinois, Woodruff studied at the John Herron Art Institute in Indianapolis, the Art Institute of Chicago, and Harvard University's Fogg Museum School. Beginning in 1927, he studied modern art theory and technique in Paris at the Académie Moderne. After four years of study in France, Woodruff returned to the United States in 1931 and joined the faculty of Atlanta University, a new school for African American students. In the mid-1940s Woodruff moved to New York and taught art education



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for more than twenty years at New York University. In 1962 Woodruff became a founding member of Spiral, an influential art group committed to addressing the concerns of African American artists and to advancing the civil rights movement.

Woodruff's long-standing commitment to the recognition of African American artists is reflected in his Art of the Negro mural series, which responds to ideas promoted by writers such as Alain Locke in books including *The New Negro* (1925) and *Negro Art: Past and Present* (1936). Locke and others believed the path to recognition of black artists was through a celebration of the unique relationship between African American artists and their African heritage. In his study for *Native Forms*, Woodruff includes references to the artistic production of various African peoples, both ancient and contemporary, in order to establish the cultural bonds between African and African American artists.

The upper zone of *Native Forms* is dominated by an imposing figure of Shango, the spirit of lightning and thunder in contemporary Yoruba culture in western Nigeria. To the left of Shango, the brightly colored masked figures that appear to sing and dance as if in a procession evoke images from ancient rock paintings in southwestern Africa. On the right of Shango, African warriors bearing colorful shields allude to the Zulu people of South Africa. In the lower half of the panel, various figures are engaged in mixing pigments, carving reliefs, and painting prehistoric wall paintings. The other works in the series provide additional links between traditional African arts and twentieth-century modernism, emphasizing Woodruff's belief that African art was one of the core cultural traditions that shaped the history of Western art.

