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The Man Who Wore Red: Allen Stringfellow

Nia Stringfellow

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Chicago Cultural Background

In the 1920s, Chicago developed a community of people referred to as Bronzeville, also known as the Black Metropolis. This was a social institution that grew as a cultural and economic ground for black urban life in Chicago. Club De Lisa was the only club in the Chitlin Circuit that blacks could sit in. The Chitlin Circuit was a small club that showcased musicians and entertainers. It was considered a safe place for blacks during the South Side, especially during the beginnings of the Civil Rights Movement. Despite negative aspects reflecting the poverty and violence of racial division, Stringfellow provided the south side and the rest of Chicago with a sense of unity, joy, and pride through his artwork. His time at the Community Art Center secured his place as a black artist and set the scene for more artists to come. “Because we were black, the white galleries just weren’t open,” Stringfellow said. The Center opened in 1941 and became Chicago’s first center for black artists.

The Man Who Wore Red

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April 2017

Summary

Known as the man who wore red, Allen Stringfellow was an African American collage and water color artist. His pieces are remembered for their radiant energy and vibrant colors, particularly the color red, which became a signature symbol for his work. Stringfellow’s childhood and history of Chicago helps us understand the depths of his influences that brought his art to life by reinforcing a sense of pride for African-Americans across the nation. The artist celebrates the unique blend of the Chicago jazz scene and the church through his art in several different settings.

Research Question: To understand how Stringfellow influenced Chicago’s black population and how his experiences created relatable memories in his artwork by studying Chicago’s black cultural history.

Allen Stringfellow Biography

1923-2004

Allen Stringfellow was born on July 9th, 1923 and was raised in Champaign, Illinois by his great-grandmother heavily influenced his spiritual life. He grew up witnessing water baptisms with the church in his hometown, Champaign, Illinois. His work depicted the energetic, joyful spirit of the church in his paintings and collages filled with dancers, choirs, pianists, and families. Although his family and other black families did not own a lot, they made a point of looking their best on Sunday morning. This mindset reveals not only the pride and dignity that black families held onto during their struggle, but also the role that faith played in their lives.

When I was coming up, church and nightclubs were our complete society. With my work, I try to capture the movement, the rhythm, the happiness, the glamour of those times. People looked their best. You didn’t go anywhere underdressed.”

The South Side of Chicago where Stringfellow worked in the 1940’s was still the center for jazz, blues, and soul music. Between 1915 and 1960, a mass migration of people moved to major cities such as Detroit, Chicago, Pittsburgh, and New York. This included more than 3 million blacks between the 1940’s and 60’s. They sought to escape racism and lynching in the south, especially during the beginnings of the Civil Rights Movement. Despite negative aspects reflecting the poverty and violence of racial division, Stringfellow provided the south side and the rest of Chicago with a sense of unity, joy, and pride through his artwork. His time at the Community Art Center secured his place as a black artist and set the scene for more artists to come. "Because we were black, the white galleries just weren’t open," Stringfellow said. The Center opened in 1941 and became Chicago’s first center for black artists.

Spirituity and the Church

Stringfellow’s upbringing in the Christian church with his great-grandmother heavily influenced his spiritual life. He grew up witness water baptisms with the church in his hometown, Champaign, Illinois. His work depicted the energetic, joyful spirit of the church in his paintings and collages filled with dancers, choirs, pianists, and families. Although his family and other black families did not own a lot, they made a point of looking their best on Sunday morning. This mindset reveals not only the pride and dignity that black families held onto during their struggle, but also the role that faith played in their lives.

"We may have been poor, but we weren’t hungry. We were happy. When we were young, we were allowed to go to all the churches. Today, people don’t feel they have to go to church on Sundays. It’s sort of an off day for some. For us, Sunday was an ‘on’ day.”

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Allen Stringfellow was born on July 9th, 1923 and was raised in Champaign, Illinois by his great-grandmother with 7 other children. After high school, he received his undergraduate degree at the University of Illinois. He pursued the rest of his artistic training at the Art Institute in Milwaukee, Wisconsin before he moved to Chicago.

As a watercolor and collage artist, Stringfellow’s artwork is widely appreciated by the black community in Chicago while also possessing the ability to represent the city’s culture. Some of his most famous works include “The Red Umbrella,” “The Gallery,” and “All That Jazz”.

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Wong, Sharon. Personal Interview. 5 Dec. 2016.


“Curators of Culture - Part 3 – WYCC.” YouTube, uploaded by WYCC PBS Chicago, 3 March


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"The Man Who Wore Red" by Nia Stringfellow, 2017. (Image: Hope College)

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