

ROBERTS PROJECTS

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"Long Overdue Recognition"
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ASHLEY WALKER Roberts Projects

BETYE Saar says it's taken the art world too long "to figure out that there are African American artists."

Long-overdue recognition

The archives of Betye Saar are part of a new initiative by the Getty Research Institute.

BY JESSICA GELT

The Getty Research Institute announced on Tuesday the creation of an African American Art History Initiative with the acquisition of the archives of Los Angeles assemblage artist Betye Saar.

The initiative, which launched with a \$5-million endowment, aims to establish the Getty as a primary center of scholarship, research and education for African American art and as a model for like-minded endeavors in the field.

"It's taken a long, long time for the art world in general to figure out that there are African American artists," said Saar, 92, over the phone from her studio. "Fifty years ago, we didn't have the kind of recognition we have today, and it still has a long way to go."

The Getty initiative, however, signals some real advancement, Saar said.

The program's mandate includes acquiring archives; the appointment of a curator and bibliographer in African American Art History; annual research fellowships; a plan to conduct oral histories of notable African American artists, scholars, critics, collectors and art dealers; and institutional partnerships with the goal of digitizing existing archival collections and collaborating on joint conferences, publications and research projects.

"It's not about building these things at the Getty for the sake of the Getty; it's

for the sake of the community," said James Cuno, president and chief executive of the J. Paul Getty Trust. "We've got the experience and resources for building up a rich archive to advance our greater understanding of African American art in our history."

Kicking off the initiative with the acquisition of Saar's archive is a promising start to accomplishing those goals, said Sophia Belsheim, deputy director of the Leimert Park-based gallery and social services organization Art + Practice, which was co-founded by artist Mark Bradford.

A+P is one of the groups that the Getty initiative plans to collaborate with. Belsheim doesn't know what form that collaboration might take yet but says that public exhibitions will likely be a key part of it and that she'd love to start with Saar's work.

"It's always so exciting to see artists who have had these very long careers be recognized while they're still alive," Belsheim says of Saar. "She is phenomenal. I'm a huge fan."

Saar said that she was in talks with the Getty about her archives for quite some time before they brought up the idea of an African American art history initiative. She toured their archive and research facilities and was hugely impressed with the level of care and efficiency she saw.

For her, it was a relief to know that her extensive personal collection of journals, art and general life ephemera would be kept in a place where her grandchildren could one day come to see it.

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BETYE Saar at the 1973 opening of an exhibition of her works at Cal State L.A.'s Fine Arts Gallery.