

# Represent

Art and Identity Among  
the Black Upper-Middle Class

**Patricia A. Banks**



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*To Cherry, James, and Angela Banks*



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# 1 Constructing Black Identities

## INTRODUCTION

In the hit television sitcom *The Cosby Show*, scenes of black life by African American artists hang in the home of the Huxtables' New York brownstone. In their elegantly appointed living room Ellis Wilson's *Funeral Procession* hangs above a fireplace, and near the front door Brenda Joy Smith's *Madonna* hangs. If any viewers thought that this fictional black upper-middle-class family had lost touch with their racial identity, the black art in their home subtly indicated otherwise. The intimate connection between middle-class blacks' racial identity and their consumption of black art has been documented in this number one show and noted in major newspapers and magazines.<sup>1</sup> The goal of this book is to describe in depth how upper-middle-class blacks construct black identities through consuming black visual art. I draw on fieldwork in New York City and Atlanta, Georgia. In these cities with large black middle-class populations and rich histories of black cultural production and consumption, I interviewed more than 100 upper-middle-class blacks, photographed the art in their homes, and attended black arts events.

In New York, I met upper-middle-class blacks like academic Joseph White and retired journalist Sidney White<sup>2</sup> who display black figurative paintings, prints, and photos throughout their home, and during the holiday season decorate their house with black angels and nativity scenes. I also talked with couples like Veronica and Craig Green, who take their son Gary to museum exhibitions on African art. In Atlanta, I met Erica Carter, who owns a sand painting of *The Door of No Return* that she bought on a trip to Gorée Island, Senegal. I also talked with Susanna and Al Franklin, who sit on the boards of black visual arts institutions.

In the pages that follow, I describe how these and the other upper-middle-class blacks I interviewed engage in black arts participation to self-consciously articulate and sustain their own and their children's racial identity. For them, activities such as decorating a home with black holiday ornaments, buying art on a trip to Africa, and sitting on the board of a black museum are practices through which they construct different aspects of

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black identity, including appearances, history, pride, and unity. By deliberately participating in black arts activities to construct their racial identity, these upper-middle-class blacks practice *black cultivated consumption*.

Through elaborating how upper-middle-class blacks construct their racial identity through consuming black culture, this book builds on the broader research on black middle-class identity. For many middle-class blacks, racial identity is an important part of how they see themselves and their families. These middle-class blacks self-consciously articulate and nurture their racial identity through moving into black neighborhoods (Hyra, 2008; Pattillo, 2007; Prince, 2004; Taylor, 2002), joining black social organizations (Lacy, 2007), and participating in other activities that are related to blacks. The theoretical argument developed in this book deepens understanding of black identity among the black middle-class by revealing how cultural consumption is also an important practice through which middle-class blacks produce and reproduce their racial identity.

This book also engages literature on class and cultural consumption. The study of class and cultural consumption is dominated by the perspective that the consumption of high-status culture establishes and maintains the class position of the middle- and upper-class (DiMaggio, 1982a, 1982b; DiMaggio & Useem, 1978; Ostrower, 1998, 2002). For example, in arguably the most influential research on class and arts participation, French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu theorizes that visiting art museums, buying art, and engaging in other forms of high-status arts participation distinguish the middle-class from the working-class (Bourdieu, 1984; Bourdieu, Darbel, & Schnapper, 1991).<sup>3</sup>

Research on the black middle-class also emphasizes how high-status cultural consumption, such as shopping at high-end stores and wearing expensive clothes, is a class marker for this group (Frazier, [1957] 1997; Lacy, 2007; Landry, 1987; Pattillo, 2007).<sup>4</sup> For example, in one of the most widely discussed and controversial portraits of black middle-class lifestyles, E. Franklin Frazier ([1957] 1997) argues that middle-class blacks are caught up in a web of conspicuous consumption where they wear costly jewelry, drive expensive cars, and consume other high-status goods to mark their class status.

While these studies cast light on the significance of high-status cultural consumption for class identity, we still know very little about the significance of high-status cultural consumption for racial identity.<sup>5</sup> I address this gap in the literature by documenting how upper-middle-class blacks construct black identities through high-status black arts participation, such as displaying original black art in their homes and attending black museum and gallery exhibitions. This is an important contribution not only because it broadens understanding of high-status cultural consumption among the black middle-class, but also because it provides insight on increasing diversity in the art world.

In recent decades, the art world has become more diverse as middle-class blacks have been developing and participating in art groups that focus on African American and African art at major museums such as the Detroit Institute of Art and the Museum of Modern Art; donating collections of African American art to institutions such as the Savannah College of Art and Design and the University of Delaware; and helping to found and support black museums such as the National Museum of African American History and Culture, which is being built on the National Mall. This book documents how increasing diversity in the art world is being driven in part by black cultivated consumption among middle-class blacks.

In the remainder of this chapter I describe the theory and literature that guides this study; outline my argument concerning black cultivated consumption; and briefly describe the sites and methods. I also want to note that while participants in this study can be most specifically described as part of the black upper-middle-class, I see black cultivated consumption as a practice that characterizes the art consumption of middle-class blacks as a group. While the black cultivated consumption of upper-middle-class blacks is likely distinct from the broader black middle-class in some ways, I expect that as a whole-middle-class blacks concertedly consume black culture to construct their racial identity.<sup>6</sup> As such, I discuss black cultivated consumption not just in reference to upper-middle-class blacks, but also the collective black middle-class.

## **RACIAL IDENTITY AND THE BLACK MIDDLE-CLASS**

The opportunities and experiences of middle-class blacks in the United States have been powerfully shaped by race. For many middle-class blacks this has meant that being black is an important dimension of how they see themselves. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, we see this with black middle-class intellectuals who “vindicated” the race through their work, and with black middle-class men and women who engaged in racial uplift through their organizational ties (Drake, 1978; Gaines, 1996; Higginbotham, 1993).<sup>7</sup>

Research on middle-class blacks in the late 20th and early 21st centuries also shows that a strong sense of racial identity is common among many members of the group. For example, in his research on African American politics, Michael Dawson (1994) finds that most middle-class blacks believe that their individual fates are linked to those of blacks as a whole.<sup>8</sup> The sense of black attachment is so strong that some middle-class blacks report feeling closer to lower-class blacks than to middle-class whites (Benjamin, 2005; Hochschild, 1995). There is also evidence that high percentages of middle-class blacks feel that they should help less advantaged blacks (Durant & Sparrow, 1997; Sampson & Milam, 1975) and that racial discrimination limits opportunities for blacks (Hochschild, 1995).<sup>9, 10</sup>



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Some middle-class blacks self-consciously articulate and nourish the conceptions and feelings that surround their racial identity through their behavior. For example, research on “black” gentrification shows how middle-class blacks move into poor, urban black neighborhoods with a mission to connect with other blacks and improve the communities (Hyra, 2008; Pattillo, 2007; Prince, 2004; Taylor, 2002). The desire to articulate and nurture black identities is also intergenerational. In her ethnographic research on suburban middle-class blacks, Karyn Lacy (2007) charts how middle-class blacks move into black middle-class neighborhoods and join black middle-class social organizations to nurture their children’s black identities. In her research on black middle-class families who live in a predominately white community, Beverly Tatum (1999) finds that childrearing for these mothers and fathers involves “cultivating blackness.” Through building black peer networks for their children and other activities, the black middle-class parents in her study hope to nurture their children’s sense of self as black (Tatum, 1997).<sup>11</sup>

While a systematic research program has not developed to examine how middle-class blacks enact and nurture black identities through cultural consumption, evidence within the broader black middle-class literature and cultural consumption literature speaks to this point. For example, in his study on race and class in Harlem, anthropologist John Jackson (2001) recounts how black middle-class residents draw on black culture to negotiate black identities. In her research on an urban community in Chicago, Mary Pattillo (Pattillo-McCoy, 1999) describes how black middle-class youth use black vernacular English and wear urban clothing styles to signify their blackness. Similarly, Paul DiMaggio and Francie Ostrower (1990) argue that higher levels of consumption of “Afro-American musical forms” among middle-class blacks than middle-class whites is evidence that middle-class blacks consume black culture to assert black identities.<sup>12</sup>

In this book, I build on this literature to deepen understanding of the ways that middle-class blacks use arts participation to assert and maintain their racial identity. I investigate the question: How do upper-middle-class blacks construct black identities for themselves and their children through the consumption of visual art?

### **BLACK CULTIVATED CONSUMPTION**

I argue that upper-middle-class blacks self-consciously engage in black arts participation (activities that involve art by black artists or about black people)<sup>13</sup> to enact and nurture their own and their children’s racial identity.<sup>14</sup> I call this practice *black cultivated consumption*. Black identity and black arts participation are mutually reinforcing because upper-middle-class blacks engage in black arts participation to enact their already

existing black identities, and the experience of black arts participation nourishes their racial identity. During this process different dimensions of black identity are constructed, including black appearances, black history, black pride, and black unity.<sup>15</sup>

*Black appearances* are constructed when upper-middle-class blacks consume black visual art to articulate and sustain understandings of black phenotype; *black history* is constructed when upper-middle-class blacks consume black visual art to enact and sustain shared understandings of a black past; *black pride* is constructed when upper-middle-class blacks consume black visual art to assert and nurture black dignity; and *black unity* is constructed when upper-middle-class blacks consume black visual art to enact and maintain racial solidarity. For example, by displaying black figurative paintings, prints, and photos in their home, Joseph and Sidney White construct a conception of black appearances; by taking their son Charles to museum exhibitions on African art, Veronica and Craig Green hope to give him an understanding of his African roots; by displaying a sand painting in her home that she bought on a trip to Gorée Island, Senegal, Erica Carter constructs black pride around overcoming racial inequality; and by serving on the boards of black visual arts institutions, Susanna and Al Franklin enact black unity.

By engaging in black cultivated consumption, upper-middle-class blacks seek pleasure that accompanies enacting and nourishing collective racial bonds through the arts, as well as redress to racial inequality. Black cultivated consumption can be a source of enjoyment for upper-middle-class blacks because it allows them to articulate and deepen their sense of belonging to a community that is important to them. Moreover, the practice of art consumption itself can be a gratifying way to experience this group attachment. For example, taking children to African museum exhibitions where they learn about their heritage is enjoyable for some upper-middle-class black families because they are connecting to a valued aspect of their past and engaging in a recreational pastime. Similarly, displaying black figurative art in homes is pleasurable for some upper-middle-class blacks because the art provides a mirror of the physical self, and because adorning homes with art can be fulfilling.

At the same time, black cultivated consumption is also rooted in a desire to respond to and rectify legacies of black marginality as well as continuing black inequality. For example, displaying art related to slavery in homes is an attempt by some upper-middle-class blacks to take care that this experience is not forgotten. In the same way, serving on the boards of black arts institutions is pursued by some upper-middle-class blacks to help ensure that they have parity with majority institutions.<sup>16</sup>

Black cultivated consumption thus stands as an activity that cannot be understood as simply arising out of and being wedded in pleasure or inequity. Instead, it is these dual dynamics that give life to this practice among upper-middle-class blacks.

## THE WORLD OF BLACK ARTS PARTICIPATION

I draw on fieldwork in and around New York City and Atlanta, Georgia, to understand black cultivated consumption among the black upper-middle-class. (See the appendix for a more detailed discussion of the methods). I chose Atlanta and New York City as sites because of their large black middle-class populations and relevance for black visual art. New York houses some of the world's leading black galleries and museums, and each year the National Black Fine Arts Show takes place in the city. Atlanta is also home to important black visual arts institutions, such as Clark Atlanta University Art Galleries, and each year the National Black Arts Festival takes place there.

When I was in New York, I lived in Morningside Heights, close to the famed 125th Street in Harlem. In Atlanta, I lived in Buckhead, an area known for its middle-class population. For over a year, I interviewed 103 upper-middle-class blacks in 88 households.<sup>17</sup> I use the term *upper-middle-class* to describe them because they are employed in jobs such as professors, lawyers, and doctors, and most also make over \$100,000 a year and have graduate degrees.<sup>18</sup> Within this category of upper-middle-class they are a diverse group. I interviewed young professionals in their 30s and retired professionals in their 70s, men and women, and individuals whose roots in the United States span decades as well as West Indian and African immigrants.

During the in-depth interviews, the first question that I usually asked participants was for them to tell me about the favorite pieces of art in their homes. As we talked about their favorite pieces of art, they would often show them to me so that by the end of the interviews I saw much of the art that they owned. From there we went on to talk about other aspects of their arts participation, such as the museums and galleries that they visit, art fairs that they attend, and art literature that they read.<sup>19</sup> This book draws most heavily on these interviews, but I also took photographs of the art in their homes,<sup>20</sup> did participant observation at black arts events, gathered archival data on the consumption of black visual art, and conducted in-depth interviews with black art professionals.

All of the participants engage in high-status black arts participation. This includes activities such as displaying original or limited edition black art in homes, going to black museums, galleries, and art fairs, reading literature about black artists, and buying black art on international trips.<sup>21</sup> However, most participants do not exclusively engage in high-status black arts participation. For example, mass-produced black art (such as black holiday ornaments and African masks) is displayed in most homes that I visited. This is consistent with research that shows that it is common for the middle-class to be “omnivores” whose arts participation crosses “high” and “low” cultural boundaries (Bryson 1996; Peterson & Simkus, 1992).

While participants are linked by their black arts participation and also high-status black arts participation, they vary in the amounts and types of black arts participation that they engage in. In terms of amount, on one end of the spectrum are people for whom black arts participation is a big part of their lives. They regularly engage in activities such as buying black art, reading literature on black art, and going to museum and gallery exhibitions on black art. On the other end of this spectrum are participants for whom black art is not a big part of their lives, and they might own one or two pieces of black art, sometimes read literature about black artists, and occasionally engage in other types of black arts participation.

Participants are also different in relationship to the types of black arts participation that they engage in. There is a broad spectrum of activities that involve art by black artists or about black people. For example, this includes activities that involve artists who are African American, West Indian, and African; black art that is legitimated or being legitimated by the art establishment as well as more “commercial” black art; black art that is in different media such as abstract and figurative fine art as well as black historical artifacts and black dolls. While some participants engage in black arts participation that crosses this range, others tend to focus on particular types. For example, some rarely consume art that is not by critically acclaimed black artists, while others favor art by artists whose work stands outside of the art establishment. Similarly, some have homes that are full of black historical artifacts or dolls, while others mostly display black paintings, prints, or sculptures.

I believe that the different types and amounts of black arts participation within the group of upper-middle-class blacks I interviewed help to strengthen the core argument of this book. Their varying engagement with black art helps to illustrate that black cultivated consumption is a practice that is shared among upper-middle-class blacks across the spectrum of consumption. From upper-middle-class blacks who are seasoned connoisseurs of black art to more casual consumers, from those who are passionate about African American art to those who favor African art, black arts participation is self-consciously pursued to construct black identities. While the construction of black identity is not the only meaning of their black arts participation, it is nonetheless an understanding that they share as individuals who have the same racial and class status.

## ON BEING (MOSTLY) ON THE INSIDE

The black cultivated consumption that I encountered in Atlanta and New York City is in many ways a very familiar experience. I grew up in a black middle-class family that displayed black art on the walls, went to black



*Figure 1.1* Abstract painting by Danny Simmons.



*Figure 1.2* African sculpture.



Figure 1.3 Sculpture by Elizabeth Catlett.



Figure 1.4 Decorative plates by Charles Bibbs, Leroy Campbell, and other artists.



*Figure 1.5* Drawing by Herman “Kofi” Bailey.



*Figure 1.6* Print by Charles Bibbs.



*Figure 1.7* Black holiday figurine.

museums, and engaged in other forms of black arts participation. In this way, my investigation of black cultivated consumption comes from the standpoint of an insider. At the same time, other aspects are less close to my experience. For example, I have not personally experienced black cultivated consumption from the position of a West Indian or African immigrant or a black man.

During each stage of this project, I have been conscious of my insider and outsider status. I have taken care to not assume that my ways of experiencing and making sense of black arts participation are shared by other middle-class blacks. I have also been mindful of the ways that gender and ethnicity shape black cultural consumption. By probing during interviews when I was not clear on participants' viewpoints or experiences, presenting my work to participants and other middle-class blacks in formal and informal settings, and collecting different types of data, I have tried to address the challenges that accompany my mostly insider, and partly outsider status.

## ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

I explore black cultivated consumption among upper-middle-class blacks in four substantive chapters that each focus on one facet of black identity.



Chapter 2 describes how participants construct black physical appearances through consuming black figurative art. In Chapter 3, I explore the construction of black history. In the next chapter, I turn to racial pride and analyze how participants draw on black art to assert the worth of blackness. Chapter 5 addresses racial unity and explores how participants experience art patronage as a collective project of black cultural advancement. There are brief discussions on the construction of black female identity in Chapters 2 and 4, black male identity in Chapter 2,<sup>22</sup> and black ethnic identity in Chapter 3. Even though future research is needed to understand these processes more systematically, the findings suggest that cultural consumption also plays an important role in the construction of these identities for upper-middle-class blacks.

The final chapter summarizes the major findings and outlines the contributions of this book for understanding racial identity and the black middle-class, as well as the broader significance of race for this group. I also situate the findings in the scholarship on class and cultural consumption, and describe how they provide a more nuanced understanding of high-status cultural consumption among the black middle-class, as well as black cultural capital within the group.

Finally, while this book focuses on the consumption of black visual art, I see it as just one form of black cultivated consumption among middle-class blacks. During interviews, participants often mentioned other black arts participation, such as going to see the dance company Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater or attending a jazz performance at Lincoln Center, in reference to their racial identity. Therefore, in the substantive chapters and conclusion I reference other black art forms to provide a broader context for the practice of black cultivated consumption among middle-class blacks.

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