

BLACK HISTORY MONTH

## ‘A kind of token of my esteem for African art’

Hale Woodruff’s ‘The Art of the Negro’ mural is alternative history of global art.



Three of the six panels from Hale Woodruff’s “The Art of the Negro.” From left, “Interchange,” “Influences” and “Muses.” He painted the six panels in 1950 and ’51, and the entire work was unveiled in 1952. PHOTOS COURTESY OF CLARK ATLANTA UNIVERSITY ART MUSEUM

By Felicia Feaster | For the AJC

Paris has its Mona Lisa and Italy its David.

But in the pantheon of American art, Atlanta has its own masterwork, even if it might be an under-the-radar piece: Hale Aspacio Woodruff’s epic six-part mural “The Art of the Negro,” which has hung for six decades in the Trevor Arnett Library rotunda outside the Clark Atlanta University Art Museum.

If those works in the Louvre and the Accademia Gallery of Florence attest to Europe’s art world supremacy, then Woodruff’s mural is a vision of a new world of African and African American creativity that challenged those Eurocentric norms. The mural also is central to Atlanta’s identity as a center for racial progress played out in music, art and politics.

Academics and curators regularly travel from around the world to see Woodruff’s mural. And scholars like Christian Kravagna, a professor at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna, laud its innovative approach. Writing for London’s Tate museum website, Kravagna said, “‘The Art of the Negro’ was

**ARTEXHIBIT**  
**“The Art of the Negro”**  
 11 a.m.–4 p.m. Tuesdays–Fridays.  
 Clark Atlanta University  
 Art Museum, Trevor Arnett Hall,  
 Second Floor, 223 James P.  
 Brawley Dr. SW, Atlanta.  
 404-880-6102,  
 cau.edu/art-museum

of vital importance in offering an alternative history of global art from the Black perspective.” Historically resonant, the six 12-by-12-foot panels created in 1950 and ’51 also are thrillingly beautiful, executed in the muted

Mural continued on E14



Hale Woodruff at work, circa 1936. During his 15 years at Atlanta University, which he began in 1931, he established the school’s art program and the Atlanta University Art Annuals.



Savannah resident and sculptor Casey Schachner designed a monument to COVID-19 victims around the globe. It’s expected to be unveiled by fall in Chicago. STEPHEN B. MORTON FOR THE AJC

## Georgia sculptor creating memorial

Her work is to honor the 7M who died of COVID-19 during the pandemic.

By Jeremy Redmon  
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Casey Schachner heard her baby’s heartbeat for the first time at an unusual location in March 2020, just days after the World Health Organization declared the coronavirus outbreak a pandemic.

The thrilling moment happened as Schachner sat in a hospital parking garage in Nashville. Masked nurses were limiting who could come inside as they sought to stop the spread of COVID-19. So they tilted Schachner’s car seat back, rubbed some aloe vera on her belly and wheeled an ultrasound machine up to her.

A sculptor and art educator, Schachner delivered a healthy baby girl seven months later. Amid the anxiety and uncertainty during those early months of the pandemic, Schachner stayed away from crowds, moved her lessons online and held her baby shower on Zoom.

Five years later, the Georgia Southern University professor is raising her daughter, Lottie, while helping create a monument to COVID-19 victims around the globe. Modeled after dandelion flowers, the Savannah resident’s soaring outdoor sculpture is expected to be unveiled in Chicago by this fall.

Her design, which was selected as part of an international contest, will memorialize the 7 million people across the world who have died with COVID-19, including 1.2 million in the United States. The disease is still killing people, though the federal government’s public health emergency declaration expired in May 2023.

Gov. Brian Kemp announced Georgia’s first death from COVID-19 on March 12, 2020. Hospitals quickly overflowed with seriously ill patients. The disease spread through nursing homes and jails. As of March of last year, when the Georgia Department of Public Health stopped updating its online count, more than 36,400 people across the state had died with the disease. The state agency has also reported more than 2.4 million cases of COVID-19 across Georgia.

Schachner is grateful her daughter is healthy and that she did not lose any relatives to COVID-19. At the same time, she recognizes she has an important responsibility to honor those who lost loved ones.

“I feel really proud to be a part of something that is going to be

Schachner continued on E14

## How Atlanta Life succeeded in its ‘quest for economic dignity for Black Americans’

By Mirtha Donastorg | mirtha.donastorg@ajc.com

The reverends were looking for a messiah.

But who they needed wouldn’t be found through sermons or Scriptures. No, their savior needed to be a businessman, not a carpenter. And he needed to be respected, rich and Black. The man they would eventually find would not only save the reverends’ organization but grow it to be one of the most successful and influential Black-owned companies in the country – for a time.

‘The art of separating people from their money is, after all, the most important of all arts.’

— Atlanta Mutual weekly bulletin, Oct. 23, 1920

In 1905, just four decades removed from the end of the Civil War, Atlanta was a city where Black citizens were still an oppressed underclass, though a few had been able to carve out a bit of success and stability. Revs. James Bryant and J.A. Hopkins’ options for a messiah who fit their criteria were few. Alonzo Herndon was a bar-

ber by trade, not a savior. The son of a white slave owner and an enslaved woman, Herndon was born in 1858 about 45 miles east of Atlanta. He worked as a sharecropper as a boy, scraping pennies together for years to try to save enough to leave the farm where he worked. He eventually turned to cut-

Atlanta Life continued on E7



Ryan Smith (center) is the executive VP of Atlanta Life Insurance Co., an organization founded in 1905 by Alonzo Herndon (bust at left) and continued by his son, Norris (right). ARVIN TEMKAR/AJC

**ABOUT THIS SERIES:** This year’s AJC Black History Month series, marking its 10th year, focuses on the role African Americans played in building Atlanta and the overwhelming influence that has had on American culture. These daily offerings appear throughout February in the paper and on AJC.com and AJC.com/news/atlanta-black-history.

WHAT’S INSIDE

### FOOD & DINING

#### A savory and sustainable ingredient

Seaweed is umami-rich, highly nutritious and has a low carbon footprint, which makes it perfect for your pantry. E9



#### New brick-and-mortar wine shop in Austell

Michael and Jessena Waldo are opening Divinely Elegant Vines in a historic row building. E9

#### INSPIRE ATLANTA Access to books

The Lilburn Woman’s Club is making sure children in eight elementary schools have new books. E4



#### BOOKS Coming of age

Slavery narrative is enrapturing tale of survival. E3



#### TRAVEL Sunny tropical shores

Stretch your budget this winter with a trip to the Caribbean. E15

## LIVING &amp; ARTS

## Lost silent film about Lincoln was unearthed by an intern

'The Heart of Lincoln' is a rare work by director and actor Francis Ford.

By Derrick Bryson Taylor  
c. 2025 The New York Times

No intern task is too small. Not getting coffee, not running errands and certainly not rummaging through piles of old films only to dig up a long-lost piece of history.

When Dan Martin was asked to sort through dozens of old film cans, some of which were rusted shut, at Historic Films Archive, a stock-footage library on New York's Long Island, he was happy to do the unglamorous work. He described the company's climate-controlled storage vault as a "dark, concrete basement" flush with films.

"This is the sort of thing that you go to school for as a film-preservation student," said Martin, 26, who is studying at Toronto Metropolitan University.

Standing in the vault during the final week of his internship in August, Martin could have picked his next stack of films from any number of shelves. The one he happened to select included a remarkable discovery: five film cans containing 16 mm film of "The Heart of Lincoln," a 1922 picture that was one of more than 7,000 silent films considered lost by the Library of Congress.

"The Heart of Lincoln," directed by and starring Francis Ford, was among roughly 10,000 films donated about 20 years ago from a university in the Midwest, said Joe Lauro, owner of Historic Films

Archive. "Most of the films from that collection were educational films that were shown in classrooms," he said. Those films were typically discarded by the institutions when they became worn out.

It is the second Lincoln film by Ford — a pioneer in early Hollywood and the older brother of John Ford, an Oscar-winning director — that has been found in recent years. In 2010, a copy of his "When Lincoln Paid" (1913) was discovered by a contractor during a demolition of a New Hampshire barn.

Francis Ford played Lincoln nine times in the silent films he directed, including "The Heart of Lincoln," a one-hour film that follows a young Lincoln seeking shelter in the home of a widow during a terrible storm. Years later, during the Civil War, that widow's son is

captured by the Yankees and is accused of being a spy. The widow goes to see Lincoln, who commutes her son's sentence and saves his life. Lincoln also signs the Emancipation Proclamation in the film.

The discovery provides important context to a director and actor who helped shape movie history but has been largely forgotten. A report published in 2013 by the Council on Library and Information Resources found that 70% of silent films made in America have been lost to time and neglect.

"There are so few of Francis Ford films extant that this was doubly delightful to find," said Kathy Fuller-Seeley, a professor of media history at the University of Texas at Austin and an academic expert on Ford.

In 1917, Ford quit Universal Pic-

tures and started his own brick-and-mortar studio. In need of money after his business manager began stealing from him, Fuller-Seeley said, he returned to the plot of a film he made in 1915, also called "The Heart of Lincoln." One crucial piece of evidence that the film Martin unearthed in the 1922 version is the presence of Ford's son Philip as a young soldier. He would not have been in California when the original version was made.

The version of "The Heart of Lincoln" that Martin found was in good condition and was cleaned and digitized. Clips were screened at a film preservation festival in Sag Harbor, New York, Lauro said, but it is not yet ready to be shown to the public. Lauro said he plans to have a score composed and have the film restored and enhanced.

## Mural

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pastels so indicative of their '50s origin. But those subdued colors coexist with Woodruff's bold critique. In "The Art of the Negro," Woodruff addresses eternal issues of art looting, indigenous art traditions, Colonialism and the often-denigrated creative output of non-Western artists.

"Their significance was enormous for the time," said Danille Taylor, director of the Clark Atlanta University Art Museum, who often leads groups of students and visitors on tours of the murals.

"These works were conceived in the 1940s," Taylor said, "when there was no other place in the Deep South where African Americans could go to graduate school. And he put these murals here to inspire them."

Born in Illinois and raised in Nashville, Woodruff studied at the Herron Art Institute in Indianapolis and at the Art Institute of Chicago. After graduation, he spent four definitive years in Paris beginning in 1927.

But Atlanta was a formative stop in Woodruff's life. Upon his arrival in the city in 1931, Woodruff took a streetcar to the Atlanta Art Association (now the High Museum) and asked to speak to the museum's director. A Black janitor who watched him walk through the museum's front door told him he was the first Black man to have done so. During his 15 years at Atlanta University, Woodruff established the university's art program and the Atlanta University Art Annuals (1942-70) to counter the lack of exhibition opportunities for many Black artists.

During a break from teaching



"I think for 1952 this was an extraordinarily radical work," Danille Taylor, director of the Clark Atlanta University Art Museum, says of "The Art of the Negro." COURTESY OF CLARK ATLANTA UNIVERSITY ART MUSEUM

in 1938, Woodruff honed his skills working side-by-side with one of the mural form's icons — Mexican artist Diego Rivera. Woodruff assisted Rivera in creating murals for the Hotel Reforma in Mexico City. CAUMA curator Clarke Brown says she sees evidence of Rivera's influence in the geometric forms that define Woodruff's work in "The Art of the Negro."

Following his time with Rivera, Woodruff was commissioned to create the Amistad murals at Alabama's Talladega College, which, in part, depict the slave rebellion aboard the Spanish slave ship La Amistad. In 2012, those newly restored murals traveled the country in an exhibition organized by the High Museum of Art.

Woodruff's third surviving mural "The Negro in California History — Settlement and Development" (1949), was commissioned by the Black-owned Golden State

Mutual Life Insurance Company in Los Angeles.

"The Art of the Negro" was Woodruff's final mural, unveiled in 1952. It was inspired by Woodruff's far-ranging interests — in the art of Africa, regionalism and classical oil paintings. Though Woodruff's Amistad murals are marked by the crisp, representational social realism of Diego Rivera, "The Art of the Negro" murals are indebted to abstraction and cubism, offering a far more stylized vision of the Black experience.

"The Art of the Negro" is a mid-century "Black Panther" and reclamation of Black heroism and influence, offering a corrective to the long-held idea that artists like Picasso, Matisse and Cezanne invented modernism.

"I've always had a high regard and respect for the African artist and his art. So this mural ... is for me a kind of token of my esteem for African art," Wood-

ruff told Al Murray of the Smithsonian's Archives of American Art in a 1968 interview.

The panels chart a history of the role of Africans and African Americans in art-making. Part one, "Native Forms," shows the foundation of art in African ritual, sculpture, performance and dance.

"This is traditional Africa and shows you how art is created and used within context," Taylor said. At the apex of the painting is a representation of the African god of thunder, Shango, that CAUMA eventually adopted as the museum's official logo.

The second painting, "Interchange," moves ahead in time to the ancient world and features Greek, Roman and Egyptian figures working together to create music, mathematics, linguistics and art. But Woodruff places African figures "a little higher to represent that they are bringing knowledge to the table," Taylor said.

Panel three, "Dissipation," is a melee of Colonialist violence and depicts the sacking of Benin in 1897, when British soldiers looted treasures from that West African country. Those artworks eventually found their way into British museums and private collections. Soldiers hoist sculptures of African figures over their heads in fits of destruction. Abstracted ribbons of fire rise from the scene.

In "Parallels," the fourth panel, Woodruff moves beyond African influence to show the artistic contributions of a wide swath of cultures, including Mayan, Aztec and Native American. During his time in Paris, said Taylor, Woodruff was exposed to African and other indigenous artworks that imprinted themselves on his visual language.

In the fifth panel, "Influences," Woodruff evokes an art gallery

exhibition of paintings and sculptures assembled one on top of the other, all showing the influence of African forms in modernism.

The final work in the series is "Muses," which Taylor said "is a pantheon of real artists across time," including Woodruff holding an African sculpture, Henry O. Tanner, Jacob Lawrence and Charles Alston. At the crest of the painting sit two female muses, one African and one European, to attest to what Taylor calls Woodruff's double consciousness.

CAUMA regularly loans its collection of some 1,100 works to institutions like the Metropolitan Museum of New York, Boston's Museum of Fine Arts and the Brooklyn Museum. The Woodruff murals, though, have never moved beyond the walls of Clark Atlanta, even during a \$75,000 conservation financed by the National Museum of African American History and Culture.

Layers of grime and smoke from hundreds of cigarettes huffed at university gatherings and mixers from the '50s until today were removed during that 2022 restoration. "They're so much brighter," Taylor said.

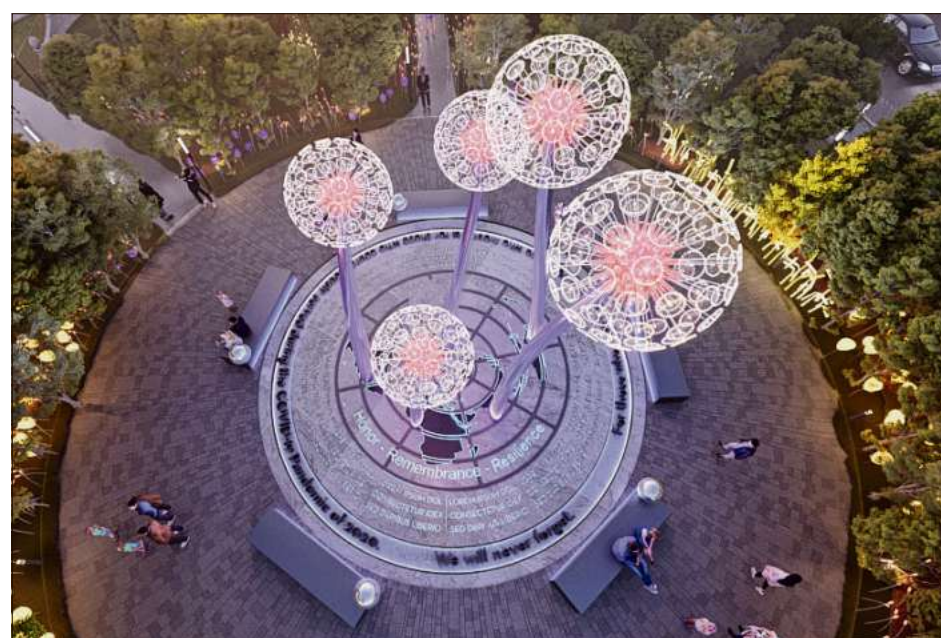
Most recently, the Art Institute of Chicago has included life-size replicas of the murals at the entrance to the critically celebrated exhibition "Project a Black Planet: The Art and Culture of PanAfrica." Critic Alison Cuddy, writing for Chicago's NewCity, calls the inclusion of the high-resolution reproduction of Woodruff's murals "a touchstone for the entire exhibition."

Even today, contemporary curators and historians recognize the ongoing resonance of Woodruff's mural.

"I think for 1952 this was an extraordinarily radical work," Taylor said.



In November 2023, the COVID-19 Monument Commission named Georgia artist Casey Schachner as the winner of its design contest to memorialize those who died and to recognize the five-year anniversary of the pandemic's beginning. Schachner modeled her outdoor sculpture, which will be located in Chicago, after dandelion flowers. COURTESY



## Schachner

continued from E1

a place and a monument where people can go to reflect on this part of history," she said. "It feels really important to get it right."

## 'A cultural landmark'

A volunteer-led panel called the COVID-19 Monument Commission is overseeing efforts to memorialize those who have passed away and to recognize the five-year anniversary of the pandemic's beginning.

The commission has raised more than half its goal of \$1 million in donations for the monument and related expenses, said Sally Metzler, an art historian who serves as the panel's chairperson.

The donations have come from individuals and organizations. Among the biggest sponsors is Pfizer, a drugmaker that developed a COVID-19 vaccine with German immuno-

therapy company BioNTech. Metzler serves as a trustee for another major sponsor, the Hektoen Institute of Medicine, a nonprofit health service and research organization.

"It is a cultural landmark that we are building," Metzler said. "It is a monument really for the world and for the collective experience of the pandemic."

Metzler emphasized the monument will also honor front line workers who performed bravely during the pandemic, including doctors and nurses. It is fitting, she said, that it will be located in the Illinois Medical District, which is home to hospitals, research facilities and thousands of health care workers.

"This is really just celebrating and honoring the resilience of those who fought on our behalf during the pandemic," said Allyson Hansen, a former Atlanta-area resident who leads the medical district. "This is about the beauty of what we were able to do as a nation."

## 'Everybody has a COVID story'

The oldest of three children, Schachner was born in Rockledge, Florida, and raised in coastal South Carolina. She completed undergraduate and graduate fine arts degrees at Baylor and Montana universities, respectively, and has exhibited her artwork internationally.

In 2011, she served as an artist in residence at the University of Georgia's Lamar Dodd School of Art in Cortona, Italy. She now teaches three-dimensional art design, ceramics and sculpture classes on Georgia Southern's Savannah campus.

The monument design contest she won was open to artists around the world. As she dreamed up her idea, Schachner studied images of the coronavirus and noticed how its spiky, plantlike design resembles a dandelion flower. It resonated with her that some people associate dandelions with healing.

Dandelion greens are an edi-

ble source of vitamin A, according to the U.S. National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine. Related to daisies, the weedy plants have been used to treat liver and kidney diseases and spleen problems, though the center says there is "no compelling scientific evidence for using dandelions as a treatment for any medical condition."

Juxtaposing dandelions with the coronavirus, Schachner said, felt "symbolic but also multilayered and not too on the nose, which is important to me."

In November 2023, the COVID-19 Monument Commission announced Schachner as the winner of its design contest, which featured a \$20,000 prize.

The monument will likely be built of steel and fiberglass and could reach up to 30 feet high, but those decisions have not been finalized. Schachner is consulting with the commission, as well as an architect and an engineering team, about where the monument will be fabricated and

how it could respond to Chicago's winds.

Conversations about her project, Schachner said, prompt people to share their own pandemic-related experiences with her. Some have told her about loved ones they lost.

"Everybody has a COVID story," she said. "It has been really inspiring — sometimes sad, sometimes healing — to hear people tell their stories."

"Usually, it becomes this kind of processing moment," she added. "Art has proved to be very therapeutic in a number of ways."

Schachner, meanwhile, is enjoying watching her daughter flourish. Lottie, she said, adores Disney characters, including Elsa and Moana. She competes in a recreation soccer program. And she is taking swimming lessons.

"She is a healthy and vibrant and fun little girl," Schachner said. "We are just so thrilled to have her in our lives."

Lottie will turn 5 on Oct. 1.