

## **Shaping Canons and Building Legacies: Collectors and the History of African American Art**

**Kinaya Hassane, Class of 2019**

E.T. Williams, Jr. is a retired real estate investor based in New York who, along with his wife Auldlyn, has amassed a prolific collection of African American art. Williams is not unique for this fact alone as many people over the last half century have decided to dedicate significant time and resources to supporting work by African American artists. However, Williams has used his collecting as a means of supporting artists through a variety of other strategies such as the widespread dispersal of their work to various institutions, the management of their estates, and his membership on the boards of different museums and arts organizations. While these various strategies fall outside the purview of what is traditionally understood as “collecting,” they are integral to what I term as Williams’s “activist-collecting” practice. I argue in my honors thesis that Williams’s activist-collecting is driven by a desire to ensure the preservation of African American art and to see the genre enter into the canon of American art. Understanding Williams’s activist-collecting can bring scholars closer to fully grasping the impact of actors like him who have played an important role in the development of African American art history.

One tenet of Williams’s activist-collecting is his membership on the board of the Souls Grown Deep Foundation. The organization was founded by Atlanta-based scholar Bill Arnett, who developed a profound interest in work by self-taught African American artists in the South whose work has typically been overlooked by the mainstream art world and designated as “folk” art. Today, the Foundation has made a large amount of donations of work by these artists to major institutions like the Metropolitan Museum of Art. By sitting on the board of the Souls Grown Deep Foundation, Williams has been able to ensure the preservation of these artworks and see that they start to earn their due critical recognition as important works of American art.

With the support of the Grua/O’Connell Research Award, I was able to travel to the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill during Winter Break to visit the archives of the Souls Grown Deep Foundation in order to learn more about its history and the artists it supports. I also travelled to Los Angeles during Spring Break to see a traveling exhibition of works from the Souls Grown Deep Foundation at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art titled, “Outliers and American Vanguard Art.” Seeing this exhibition allowed me to observe how Williams’s personal goal of preserving and elevating African American art history was being realized in the gallery space.

**Faculty Mentor: Dana Byrd**

**Funded by the Grua/O’Connell Research Award**