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VMFA Receives Grant to Conserve 146 Photographs by African American Artists Bank of America Art Conservation Project Grant Helps to Preserve Kamoinge Workshop Collection

Richmond, VA—The Virginia Museum of Fine Arts has been awarded a 2018 Bank of America Art Conservation Project grant, one of only 21 institutions in the world to receive the grant this year. This grant supports a year-long effort to conserve, stabilize and digitize 146 photographs from the museum’s Kamoinge Workshop collection—the most complete of its kind. The Bank of America Art Conservation Project seeks to preserve culturally significant works of art from around the world. In 2016, the bank supported the conservation of 60 works on paper from the Ludwig and Rosy Fischer Collection of German Expressionist Art.



Untitled (Black Muslim), 1960s, Louis Draper (American, 1935-2002), gelatin silver print. Gift of Louis H. Draper Trust, 2013.156

“Bank of America’s generous support and dedication to the arts will allow us to carefully stabilize and preserve these important pieces and ensure that the work of Kamoinge Workshop artists are included in future narratives of 20th-century photography,” VMFA Director Alex Nyerges said. “By making these photographs available digitally, the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts will be able to introduce them to a much larger audience—including visitors, educators, students and scholars—while maintaining the highest standards of stewardship.”

VMFA acquired the archive of Richmond-born, African-American photographer Louis Draper in 2015, following an earlier acquisition of 13 of his photographs in 2013. During the first decade of Kamoinge’s activity—in the midst of the civil rights movement—Draper, a Kamoinge Workshop founder, and other artists of the collective exhibited and published work with the intention of elevating the photographic representation of African-American life beyond the stereotypes often

depicted in popular media. Kamoinge members focused their cameras on the environments in which they lived, engaged in the genres of street photography and abstraction and photographed notable figures they encountered, including Malcolm X, Fannie Lou Hamer, Sun Ra and Miles Davis.

Black photographers faced significant social and professional challenges as they worked in a field predominantly occupied by white photographers in the 1960s. Keenly aware that African American photographers were regularly excluded from mainstream media organizations, such as the American Society of Media Photographers, they chose to form their own collective. These artists were also the driving force behind the *Black Photographers Annual*, a seminal publication that featured the work of a wide variety of black photographers, examples of which remain on view at VMFA through May 12, 2019.

Photographs by seven key Kamoinge artists will be part of the conservation project, including Louis Draper, Anthony Barboza, Adger Cowans, Roy DeCarava, Beuford Smith, Ming Smith and Shawn Walker. Since the artists’ photographs were published in magazines and journals, requiring them to be handled frequently, many of them are in fragile condition and are not suitable for exhibition. Conservation treatment will address damages such as tears, creases and insecure photographic emulsion. Upon completion of the project, all of the objects will be photographed for documentation purposes and digitized for scholarly and public access.

“At Bank of America, we believe that arts matter and give communities the power to thrive and connect with each other,” said Victor Branch, Richmond market president, Bank of America. “VMFA plays an important role in our community and we are honored to support its efforts to restore the works of the Kamoinge Workshop photographers, so they can be appreciated and studied for years to come.”

As part of its 2015-2020 Strategic Plan initiative to increase the number of works by African and African American artists in its holdings, VMFA is in the process of acquiring more photographs from the Kamoinge Workshop. Because of these dedicated efforts, VMFA has established itself as the country’s leading repository of photographs by early members of the Kamoinge Workshop.

Works from this collection will be on view in the upcoming exhibition *Working Together: Louis Draper and the Kamoinge Workshop*, which opens January 2020 at VMFA. A catalogue will accompany the exhibition, which will travel to two additional venues throughout 2020 and 2021. VMFA will also develop an online portal which will provide broader access to the Kamoinge collection.

About the Kamoinge Workshop

The Kamoinge Workshop was formed in 1963, and its name means “a group of people acting together” in Gikuyu, the language of the Kikuyu people of Kenya. While the artists did not work alongside each other, they met weekly to show each other their work and frequently exhibited together. One document from Draper’s archives includes his own description of the founding of Kamoinge: “This was at the height of civil unrest across the country and a year before the massive civil resistance in Harlem. Cognizant of the forces for change revolving around Kamoinge, we dedicated ourselves to ‘speak of our lives as only we can.’ This was our story to tell and we set out to create the kind of images of our communities that spoke of the truth we’d witnessed and that countered the untruths we’d all seen in mainline publications.”

Still active today, Kamoinge is the longest running nonprofit photography collective in the history of the medium. VMFA’s collection of their early work, the largest assembled by any museum in the country, not only expands the canon of 20th-century art history, but also deepens the understanding of the role of African American artists in changing perceptions of race in the 1960s and 1970s. Conservation of these objects will help VMFA to tell the story of this influential group, who have yet to receive sustained scholarly exploration.

About Bank of America

The Bank of America Art Conservation Project provides grant funding to nonprofit cultural institutions throughout the world to conserve historically or culturally significant works of art that are in danger of deterioration. Since the Art Conservation Project began in 2010, Bank of America has provided grants for more than 150 projects in 31 countries on six continents to conserve paintings, sculptures, archaeological and architectural pieces that are critically important to cultural heritage and the history of art.

Bank of America is guided by a common purpose to help make financial lives better, through the power of every connection. They deliver on this through responsible growth with a focus on environmental, social and governance (ESG) leadership. ESG is embedded across eight lines of business and reflects how Bank of America helps fuel the global economy, builds trust and credibility, and represents a company that people want to work for, invest in and do business with. This is demonstrated in the inclusive and supportive workplace Bank of America creates for employees, the responsible products and services they offer clients, and the impact they make around the world in helping local economies thrive. An important part of this work is forming strong partnerships with nonprofits and advocacy groups, such as community, consumer and environmental organizations, to bring together collective networks and expertise to achieve greater impact.

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About the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts

The Virginia Museum of Fine Arts in Richmond, Virginia, is one of the largest comprehensive art museums in the United States. VMFA, which opened in 1936, is a state agency and privately endowed educational institution. Its purpose is to collect, preserve, exhibit and interpret art, and to encourage the study of the arts. Through the Office of Statewide Partnerships program, the museum offers curated exhibitions, arts-related audiovisual programs, symposia, lectures, conferences and workshops by visual and performing artists. In addition to presenting a wide array of special exhibitions, the museum provides visitors with the opportunity to experience a global collection of art that spans more than 6,000 years. VMFA's permanent holdings encompass nearly 40,000 artworks, including the largest public collection of Fabergé outside of Russia, the finest collection of Art Nouveau outside of Paris, and one of the nation's finest collections of American art. VMFA is also home to important collections of Chinese art, English silver, and French Impressionist, Post-Impressionist, British sporting and modern and contemporary art, as well as renowned South Asian, Himalayan and African art. In May 2010, VMFA opened its doors to the public after a transformative expansion, the largest in its history.

The Virginia Museum of Fine Arts is the only art museum in the United States open 365 days a year with free general admission. For additional information, telephone 804-340-1400 or visit www.VMFA.museum.

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