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VMFA to Exhibit *Working Together: Louis Draper and the Kamoinge Workshop*

Exhibition features the work of 15 Kamoinge Workshop members and explores their role in 20th-century art history



Kamoinge Group Portrait, 1973, Anthony Barboza (American, born 1944), digital print.
Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Eric and Jeanette Lipman Fund, 2019.249 © Anthony Barboza photog

Richmond, Virginia — Beginning this February, the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts will highlight the work of a remarkable group of African American photographers in the exhibition *Working Together: Louis Draper and the Kamoinge Workshop*. On display in Evans Court Gallery from Feb. 1 to June 14, 2020, the exhibition features nearly 180 photographs by fifteen of the early members of the Kamoinge Workshop. *Working Together* tells the story of the first two decades of this collective of artists, who expanded the boundaries of photography as an art form during a critical era of Black self-determination in the 1960s and 1970s. This free exhibition is curated by Dr. Sarah Eckhardt, VMFA's Associate Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art.

The exhibition has local roots through Louis Draper (1935–2002), who was born in Henrico County and attended the Virginia Randolph School and Virginia State College (now University) before moving to New York in 1957. It was there that Draper met other African American photographers, and in 1963 they came together to form the Kamoinge Workshop.

The word Kamoinge means “a group of people acting and working together” in Gikuyu, the language of the Kikuyu people of Kenya. The collective met weekly to look at each other’s work, support one another, and organize their own exhibitions. They were also the driving force behind the *Black Photographers Annual*, a publication that featured the work of black photographers at a time when mainstream publications offered few opportunities for African Americans. Besides Draper, the early Kamoinge members represented in this exhibition are Anthony Barboza, Adger Cowans, Danny Dawson, Roy DeCarava, Al Fennar, Ray Francis, Herman Howard, Jimmie Mannas, Herb Randall, Herb Robinson, Beuford Smith, Ming Smith, Shawn Walker and Calvin Wilson.

Planning for this exhibition began in 2015 when the museum acquired Draper’s complete archive from his sister, Nell Draper-Winston. The archive consists of more than 50,000 items, including photographs, negatives, contact sheets, slides, computer disks, audiovisual materials, and camera equipment, as well as 15 boxes of valuable documents and publications, which include significant materials about the formation and early years of the Kamoinge Workshop. Thanks to a generous grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Draper archive is now completely catalogued, digitized and will be available on the museum’s website before the exhibition opens. VMFA also received a grant from Bank of America to conserve, stabilize and digitize works in its collection of Kamoinge photographs.

“The Virginia Museum of Fine Arts is proud to house the archive of this talented Richmond photographer as well as the most extensive collection of photographs by early members of the Kamoinge Workshop,” said VMFA Director Alex Nyerges. “Our hope is that visitors will learn more about this collective of photographers and experience the beautiful images they created during a time when works by African American artists were marginalized or ignored.”

“When I first had the privilege of looking at Draper’s photographs and began reading his descriptions of the collective’s purpose, I realized this story was of national significance—both art historically and politically,” said Eckhardt.

Eckhardt pointed to a quote by Draper from the VMFA archive that underscores the significance of the African American collective that formed at the height of the civil rights movement and is still active today: “Cognizant of the forces for change revolving around Kamoinge, we dedicated ourselves to speak of our lives as only we can,” Draper wrote. “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 untruth we’d all seen in mainline publications.”

The exhibition is accompanied by a 304-page illustrated catalogue by Eckhardt, which includes a preface by Deborah Willis and additional essays by Erina Duganne, Romi Crawford, John Edwin Mason and Bill Gaskins. After the exhibition closes at VMFA it will travel to the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York and two additional museum venues in the United States.

Sponsorship Information

Working Together: Louis Draper and the Kamoinge Workshop is organized by the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts. Sponsors include Altria Group, the Fabergé Ball Endowment, the Elisabeth Shelton Gottwald Fund, the Community Foundation for a greater Richmond, Michael Schewel and Priscilla Burbank, the Wayne and Nancy Chasen Family Fund of the Community Foundation for a greater Richmond, Drs. Ronald A. and Betty Neal Crutcher, and Philip and Kay Davidson. VMFA is grateful to the Bank of America Art Conservation Project and the National Endowment for the Humanities for their partnership in making this exhibition possible. Marketing support for Evans Court exhibitions is provided by the Charles G. Thalheimer Fund.

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 50,000 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, 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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