

A^{TO}Z
OF AFRICAN AMERICANS

AFRICAN AMERICANS
IN THE
VISUAL ARTS

Revised Edition

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which remains their home today. His painting style at first was patterned after the German expressionists, who focused on recognizable figures in an abstract setting with dark, emotionally intense colors. Gilliam gradually moved to a new school of art, color-field painting, which emerged in New York City in the late 1950s. The color-field artists were abstract artists who reveled in simple compositions full of clear, bright colors.

Gilliam literally poured colors onto his canvases. He would fold a still wet painting onto itself to imprint new forms and shapes on it. Then in 1965 he tried something even more innovative. From his studio, he saw women hanging their laundry on clotheslines to dry. He wondered why a painting couldn't hang as freely, without benefit of frame or bar supporters. So he began to drape his loose canvases on walls and suspend them from ceilings. Folded and wrinkled, the canvas itself became part of the artwork. For this revolutionary technique Gilliam was dubbed "father of the draped canvas" and became the most prominent African-American artist of the color-field school.

"Color is the most tantalizing element in painting," Gilliam has said, "but I'm very much involved with structure and shape . . . whether the painting is on a structure or hanging free in space, or whether it is a found object or a proper sculpture on a pedestal, it is still a statement."

In 1975, he created his most extravagant draped canvas. *Seahorses* covered several hundred feet of paint-stained canvas and stretched across the outside walls of two museum wings of the Philadelphia Museum of Art in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

In the late 1970s, Gilliam developed a new style of painting. Inspired by the jazz music of such musicians as Dizzy Gillespie and Miles Davis, he began to create geometric collages and patchwork-quilt-like canvases using multiple layers of thick paint. In recent years, he has continued to create large, monumental works across the country. A major retrospective of his work was mounted at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C.,

in 2005. He donated his silkscreen print *Museum Moment* to the Smithsonian Institution in 2009.

For more than 30 years, Sam Gilliam has taught in both public schools and universities, including the University of Maryland in College Park and Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. He was named the 2006 Alumnus of the Year by his alma mater, the University of Louisville. Gilliam lives in Washington, D.C., with his wife, who writes a syndicated column for the *Washington Post*. They have three daughters.

"I am a better artist today in that I am obviously a better teacher," he has said. "Whether I am teaching or making art, the process is fundamentally the same: I am creating."

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Greaves, William

(William Garfield Greaves)
(1926–) *documentary filmmaker, film producer, screenwriter, actor*

Known as the leading African-American documentary filmmaker, William Greaves has been a part of the independent black film industry as



Documentary filmmaker William Greaves is seen here on the set of *Black Journal* with executive editor Lou Potter (left). Greaves helped create and host this groundbreaking television newsmagazine in the 1960s. (Photofest)

actor, director, producer, and writer for more than five decades.

He was born on October 8, 1926, in New York City. He attended City College in New York and later joined an African dance company. He soon turned to acting on the stage and was in the original Broadway production of the musical *Finian's Rainbow*. Greaves made his film debut in the black independent film *Sepia Cinderella* (1947). Over the next several years he appeared in a number of black films, including *Souls of Sin* (1949), produced by pioneering black filmmaker WILLIAM ALEXANDER. In the early 1950s, discouraged by

the lack of opportunities for blacks in mainstream filmmaking, Greaves moved to Canada, where he worked for the National Film Board. Between 1956 and 1959, he edited and did the sound for more than a dozen Canadian short films, learning every aspect of filmmaking in the process. Many of these works were public service films with such titles as *Fast Fire Suppression* (1956) and *Profile of a Problem Drinker* (1957). He also worked on a series of nature documentaries in the Canadian wilderness.

Greaves returned to the United States and raised enough money to direct his first documentary,

Emergency Ward (1959). During the 1960s he found work in television and served as executive producer and cohost of the groundbreaking Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) series *Black Journal*, for which he won an Emmy in 1968. This program is generally considered among the first to use a news magazine format. From 1969 to 1982 he taught film acting at New York's Strasberg Theatre Institute.

In 1967, Greaves wrote, directed, and produced a unique experimental film about the making of a movie, with the strange title *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One*. The film was poorly received and was not seen again until it was rediscovered 24 years later in 1991 and shown during a retrospective of Greaves's work at the Brooklyn Museum in New York City. At that time, it was hailed as an extraordinary exploration of the nature of filmmaking. In 2005, Greaves made a sequel, *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take 2½*.

Greaves produced three documentaries during the 1970s—*The Voice of La Raza* (1972), about the radical Latino organization; *From These Roots* (1974), which dealt with the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s; and *Ali, the Fighter* (1975), about the Muhammad Ali–Joe Frazier heavyweight fight.

In a rare foray into commercial filmmaking, Greaves served as executive producer of the Richard Pryor movie *Bustin' Loose* (1981). He reemerged after a long dry spell in 1990 with several important projects. He directed and hosted *That's Black Entertainment*, a retrospective look at African Americans in movies, and produced *Ida B. Wells: A Passion for Justice*, a biographical film about the great black educator. This latter film won 19 film festival awards and was nominated for an Image Award in 1990 from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

Greaves's most recent film, another biography, is *Ralph Bunche: An American Odyssey* (2000), about the life of the undersecretary-general of the United Nations and the first African American to win a Nobel Prize for Peace. Narrated by actor Sidney Poitier, *Ralph Bunche* was shown on PBS

and has won the Golden Award at two international film festivals.

William Greaves was inducted into the Black Filmmakers Hall of Fame in 1980 and received a Life Achievement Award from the Association of Independent Video and Filmmakers in 1986. He is a member of the board of directors of the Actors Studio in New York.

Speaking of his life in documentary film, Greaves has said, "I'm one of those individuals who gravitate towards knowledge, information, expansion of my consciousness."

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Gunn, Bill

(William Harrison Gunn)
(1934–1989) *filmmaker, screenwriter
playwright, actor*

A screenwriter of sensitivity and rare insight into the black experience, Bill Gunn directed