

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

# Rosa Parks, Waiting to be Found

The Civil Rights Icon's Huge Collection of Personal Effects Must Be Sold Intact, a Daunting Prospect for Some Scholars

By PIA CATTON

Civil rights heroine Rosa Parks's archive may reveal the full scope of her political thinking, but the scholarship on this American icon, who in 1955 famously refused to relinquish her bus seat to a white passenger in Montgomery, Ala., is stalled: At least 1,800 items she once possessed, including her writings, clothing and furniture, are sitting in warehouses, waiting to be explored by biographers and historians.

A Michigan court has decided that the collection must be sold as one entity, rather than piecemeal. And while the acquisition would seem to be a natural for any number of institutions, at least one in New York has so far had to pass: the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, the Harlem-based research institution that is part of the New York Public Library system.

The center's new director, Khalil Gibran Muhammad, who stepped into the role in July, says the institution would like to acquire the archive. But because the collection must be purchased in its entirety, the library would end up with a number of three-dimensional objects, such as the clothing and furniture, that it would not be in the position to fully exhibit or study.

"The library is not able to absorb all the material," he said. "It's the documents, photographs and handwritten notes that have the real scholarly value. They could unpack her thoughts about the world that was changing around her."

The Manhattan-based auction house Guernsey's was selected by the Michigan court to inventory the property in the months after her death in 2005. About a year later, it was asked handle the sale of



Above, Rosa Parks posed on a bus shortly after refusing to move for a white rider; below right, President Bill Clinton presented her with the Presidential Medal of Freedom on Sept. 9, 1996.

the collection. "We were only given about a week's time to make the inventory," said the president of Guernsey's, Arlan Ettinger. "The inventory was incomplete because one entry might be multiple things, such as an envelope containing many letters."

As a young woman, Rosa Parks wrote out her thoughts frequently, often on whatever paper she had available to her, said Mr. Ettinger, "like the reverse side of a handout from her church."

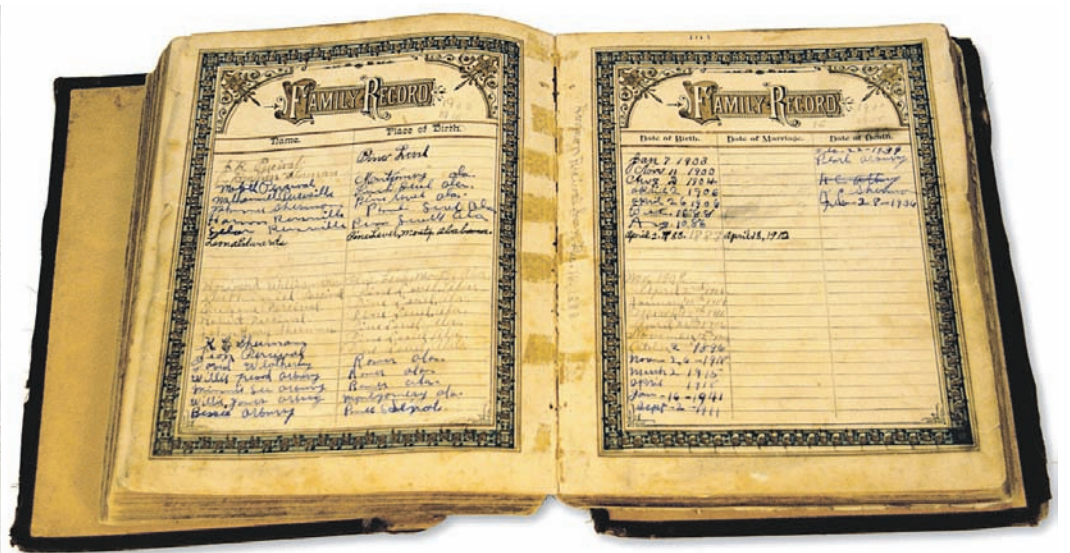
Setting a value on the collection presented a challenge because there is no precedent for the sale of material by

Parks. Mr. Ettinger estimates that the collection could sell for between \$8 million and \$10 million.

In 2006, Martin Luther King Jr.'s archive was purchased for \$32 million by a group of Atlanta business and civic leaders. The collection was then transferred to Morehouse College, King's alma mater.

"The Martin Luther King archive is exclusively paper, and it is really suited to scholarly research, but not public exhibition. The Parks archive covers both. There are photo albums, 50 hats, eyeglasses, furniture," Mr. Ettinger said.

Guernsey's has made some



Above, the family Bible owned by Rosa Parks, which has been passed down from generation to generation.



To Rosa Parks Congratulations! Bill Clinton

items available for potential buyers to view. Among them, as has been recently reported, is a written account of a near sexual assault that had not been previously known to Parks scholars. But that essay has raised controversy because it is a private event made public without supporting research.

"The essay is about resistance," said Jeanne Theoharis, a Brooklyn College professor who is writing a biography of Parks. "She responds [to the unwanted advances] with a lecture on white supremacy. What it is revealing of is the political mind of Rosa Parks. It is disturbing to me that people have overlooked that."

Dr. Muhammad says that if a patron were to purchase the collection and donate it to the Schomburg Center, the potential benefit would be the ability to track Parks's long-term view of the changes in the history of civil rights.

"She lived such a long life," he said. "The part that I would be most interested in is to see how Rosa Parks navigated the changing post-civil rights world. What did she make of the world after Martin Luther King's assassination, as well as the black mayors of cities, such as Gary, Cleveland and Newark?"

The inclusion of the three-dimensional objects "would pose a bit of a challenge," he said, adding that the library is not in the financial position to buy items that would not further its research missions. "We are looking forward to a healthy fiscal year, but we are not flush with cash," he said.

The trove of papers though, could reveal a great deal: "Until scholars see the materials, they can't tell the full weight of her analysis."



David Levine, Forum Gallery

FINE ART | By Lance Esplund

## Of a Decade and a Dollar

That Seventies Show

Forum Gallery  
730 Fifth Ave., (212) 355-4545  
Through Sep. 2

During August many New York galleries, if they remain open, are half-staffed and running at half-speed. Most limit their hours and mount slight, thematic group shows that rarely live up to the hype. Built primarily out of a gallery's stable, as well as assorted fresh faces and odds-and-ends, the principle function of these smorgasbord exhibitions is to reacquaint audiences with a gallery's mission. Despite their overarching theses, they generally offer few surprises.

"That Seventies Show," featuring roughly 30 paintings, drawings, prints and sculptures created between 1970

and 1980, purports to present a diverse and emblematic portrait of the 1970s, a period in which, "unlike previous decades," its "important art cannot be characterized by a term, or label," but instead "represents the origins of pluralism and defies the idea of a collective effort or single artistic movement."

Certainly there is truth to this statement about a period when figurative and abstract artists, photorealists, conceptualists, minimalists and performance and video artists were all in great number, but for an exhibition advertising a pluralist menu, "That Seventies Show" gives us a narrow and somewhat provincial slice of the '70s pie.

This is not to suggest that there are not some very good

works here, including a tropical collage by Romare Bearden and prints by Henry Moore. Rackstraw Downes's wooded landscape "Nyack" (1972) is gnarled yet airy. Chaim Gross's bronze figurative sculpture "Balancing" (1972) is joyous, acrobatic. David Levine's lovely watercolor "Taping 'As You Like It'" (c. 1979), with its park, stage and costumed actors, recalls an 18th-century *fête galante*. And Ilya Bolotowsky's neoplastic, three-sided, painted wood sculpture "Trylon" (1977) is a masterly exploration of primaries, opacity and transparency. Despite its shortcomings, "That Seventies Show" is cohesive, varied and representative of certain aspects of an era; but, with limited scope, it calls for a more comprehensive response to a complicated decade.

Nature in Nature:  
Robert Lobe in Prospect Park

The Audubon Center at the Boathouse and Lullwater Prospect Park, Brooklyn  
Through Nov. 18

In traditional Japanese gardens, art and nature are so delicately nuanced and balanced that it is often difficult to discern where, exactly, nature ends and art begins. The natural and the handmade—wilderness and rationality—are in harmony.

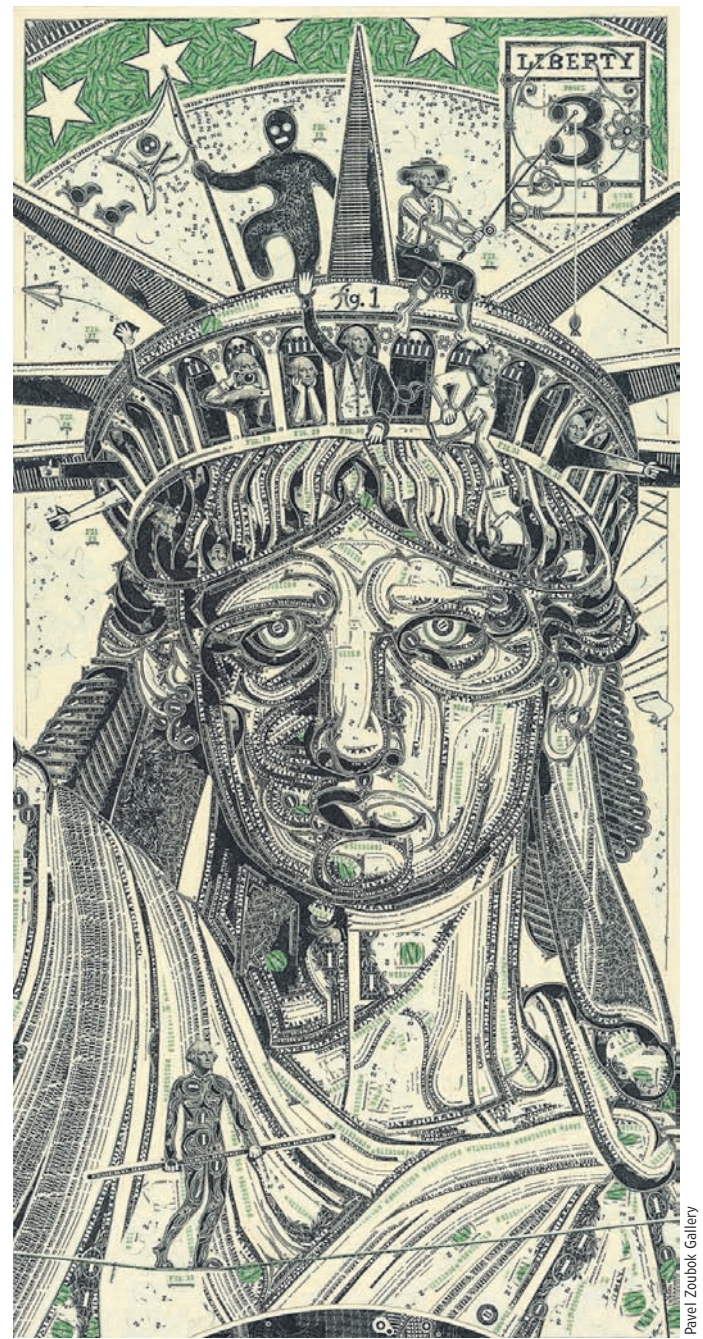
Sculptor Robert Lobe (b. 1945) may not have the sensitivity of a Japanese gardener (his blunt forms are equally indebted to stage design, the art of trompe-l'oeil and the sculp-

ture of David Smith), but his three hammered aluminum *repoussé* sculptures—placed in and around Lullwater near the Boathouse in Prospect Park—wed Eastern and Western sensibilities. Mr. Lobe's hollow sculptures, which span nearly 12 feet by 14 feet, comprise aluminum plates, which are formed over large boulders and parts of trees and then combined and riveted into strange, bumpy, amorphous amalgamations that resemble petrified rock and wood, but which also can suggest monument and animal.

Each sculpture changes character in the round and changes color—from gleaming silver to driftwood-gray—in different light. The crude cruciform "Antique Jenny" (2009-11) marks its place like an ancient headstone. "Nature's Clock" (2005-11) looks like a giant pile of kindling, yet its rock forms step upward with ceremonial conviction; and a tree form, splayed at its end, adds regal, crownlike flair. Seemingly suspended above the surface of Lullwater is "Invisible Earth" (2007-11). With the grace of a spider, it appears—in the water's slow, mossy current—to creep along the surface of the lake. Lurching, its forms intertwined—evoking lovers, a rogue wave, a sea monster and a mother and child—it transcends the elements of its fabrication.

Mark Wagner: Give Me Liberty or Give Me Death

Pavel Zoubok Gallery  
533 W. 23rd St., (212) 675-7490  
Through Aug. 12



Above, one of the 14 panels from Mark Wagner's 'Liberty.' Above left, David Levine's 'Taping 'As You Like It''

Brooklyn collage artist Mark Wagner continues to work almost exclusively with his signature material, the U.S. dollar.

Some 30 small artworks utilizing collage, letterpress printing, sculpture and painting fill out this exhibition; but the centerpiece is an astonishingly intricate and complex 17-foot by 6-foot visual essay "Liberty" (2011), a 1/11 scale collage that riffs off the subject of the "Statue of Liberty." Comprising 14 panels and made from 81,895 pieces cut from 1,121 crisp, new U.S. dollar bills, "Liberty" is mounted at an angle, and its dizzying, through-the-rabbit-hole journey is best launched from the gallery's elevated viewing platform.

Mr. Wagner can get bogged down in frenetic details, personal mythologies, political commentary, irony and illustrative puns at the expense of the whole composition—the

whole story. He can seem to be a visionary tilting at windmills, lost on his own private quest. But what a remarkable quest it is.

Faced with his manically inventive and elaborate use of his material, at times recalling the marginalia of illuminated manuscripts and the ornamentation of Italian Renaissance book design; and his endless depictions of George Washington—as angel, bellhop, businessman, clockwork, cowboy, founding father, topiary, traffic cop and window washer (continually outfoxing his nemesis the Gingerbread man)—is to give in freely to his fantastic voyage.

At a time when our beloved greenback is devaluing and its corporeality is threatened by ones and zeroes, Mr. Wagner's art gives new meaning to the value of the dollar.

Mr. Esplund writes about art for the Journal.



Robert Lobe's 'Invisible Earth' is seemingly suspended above Lullwater.

ROBERT LOBE

PAVEL ZOUBOK GALLERY