ROSE PIPER: NEW DISCOVERIES

A THESIS IN
Art and Art History

Presented to the Faculty of the University of Missouri-Kansas City in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

MASTER OF ARTS

by
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ROSE PIPER

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ABSTRACT

Rose Piper (1917-2005) was an African-American artist, based primarily in New York, who garnered attention with her success in oil painting. She utilized her talent to transcend medium in a multidisciplinary career. Although Piper is not a widely known artist, her ability and skill make her deserving of a place in the art historical narrative. I have organized her career into three distinct time phases: 1) early career (1940s-1950s), 2) middle career (1950s-1970s) and 3) late career (1970s-1990s). Piper’s early career consisted mostly of oil paintings completed under the award of two Rosenwald Fellowships for which she was encouraged to apply while studying at the Arts Students League. The *Blues and Negro Folk Song* series exposed Piper’s work to a larger audience, earning critically acclaimed reviews. In 1948, Piper traveled to Paris to continue her studies at École des Beaux-Arts. After she returned to the United States, financial constraints prompted her to begin her commercial career. Piper’s middle career spanned the majority of her working life. During the early 1950s she began *Ransier Studio Cards*, a greeting card company at which she was involved in the entire production process. After the business folded, Piper began a twenty-eight year term in the textile industry where she rose through
the ranks of the garment industry. Piper’s textile career included over ten design firms, some of the firms included: *JJ Knitted Fabrics, Fred Levy Studio*, and many others. In 1979, Piper retired from the textile industry and returned to creating fine art. In her late career, she combined her art historical knowledge and eye for detail to create a new body of work which differed stylistically from her early career combining her knack for oil painting and textile design. Ultimately, Piper gained recognition for her contributions to art in the twentieth century. She was honored with a series of retrospectives that continued until 2003, just two years before the artist’s death. Although Piper’s artwork is now shown around the globe, there is still very little known about her entire career as an artist.
The faculty listed below, appointed by the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences have examined a thesis titled “Rose Piper: A Monograph” presented by Meghan Dohogne, candidate for the Master of Arts degree, and certify that in their opinion it is worthy of acceptance.

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Really and truly, I want to thank my parents, Stuart and Kim Dohogne for their unwavering support. I was able to follow my curiosity and enthusiasm because they are always in my
corner and truly help me succeed in what I set my mind to, even if it has taken some time for them to adjust to the idea of Art History. I also want to thank my grandparents, Bob and Jeanette Dohogne and Curt and Judy Mangels, who built the foundation for our wonderful family. They have held us all together and fostered an environment of love and hard work that can lead anyone to success. I am so lucky to claim them as my own. It is to my family I owe any past, present, and future success.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

_I would have been able to do it if I would have been able to continue painting. Because I have no doubt that I would have made it and been a well-known painter today. I mean top. One of the top. However, it didn’t work out too badly. I am right now painting._-Rose Piper

What is the mark of superior artistic ability? Is it the mastery of a particular style? Or perhaps the number of times an artist’s name appears in the textbooks? What makes an artist worthy of remembering? Although Rose Ransier Piper does not fit into these specific criteria, her contribution to art was undeniable. Piper’s name does not appear in any of the major textbooks. Her artistic style was not singular, but rather a multitude of styles, so she cannot be credited as introducing any particular one. However, Piper displayed her superior artistic ability when she was forced to adapt her fine arts training into a commercial career. In my thesis I construct a monograph of the artistic career of Rose Piper. Her career was shaped by external life factors that altered her art practice.

Her artistic career can be marked by three distinct shifts: 1) early experimental oil painting, 2) commercial design, and 3) a confident return to fine art in a variety of media.

At the outset of her artistic career, thanks to a prestigious fellowship, Piper began a promising series of oil paintings which combined African-American themes with Cubism. However, with her fellowship fund depleted and a disastrous marriage, Piper was forced to turn away from painting in order to provide an income for her family. She began a greeting

\footnote{Rose Piper. Interview by Richard Martin. Video. UCCA film archives. August 8, 1995.}
card business which would later segue into textile design. For the next twenty-eight years, she transferred the artistic energy of her paintings to the garment industry. After years in the corporate world and after raising her children, she was able to leave the textile industry completely and return to art free of product design.

In this thesis, there will be four chapters and a conclusion which provide the framework for studying Rose Piper’s career. The first chapter examines Piper’s childhood, providing some context for the major themes in her art. The second chapter discusses Piper’s early career, focusing mostly around her fine arts training and oil paintings. The third chapter outlines Piper’s commercial career, including her greeting card business and work in the textile design industry. The fourth chapter explores Piper’s return to fine art after the end of her commercial career. Although there are very distinct changes in the shifts that Piper made in her career, the artworks in each stage built to another time in her life.

Piper was a gifted artist with a fiery personality who commanded the inner strength to overcome hardships. Her inner driving force permeated her artworks, resulting in a powerful career as an artist.

Currently, there is little scholarship discussing the life and career of Rose Piper. Richard Martin, Ann Eden Gibson and Graham Lock are the three individuals who have provided the most in depth study of Piper. These three scholars were particularly interested in Piper’s early career. Together, they have provided narrative and analysis for select works and Piper’s artistic style during this time.

Rose Piper and her identical twin sister Virginia were born on October 7, 1917. Rose was named after her Aunt Rosa who had died earlier that year. Her parents were
raised in traditional Southern homes in Georgia and Virginia. After the birth of Rose and Virginia, the family moved north to Freeport, Rhode Island. In the early 1920s, the family moved into a Sicilian neighborhood in the Bronx; they blossomed in the close knit community that heavily emphasized family values. Piper’s father took a vested interest in the education of his children and promoted learning together as a family. Piper recalls, “When we were little before we went to school, my father would set up a blackboard and chairs to teach us Greek, Latin, and math.” Although Piper claimed to be the “dumbest” of her three siblings, the educational foundation she received from her father was an important element of her upbringing.

Piper had fond happy memories of her childhood. The trips that Piper and her sister often made to Augusta and Forsyth, Georgia defined her childhood. They visited and stayed with family members who exposed them to southern culture. Unfortunately, on one of their trips, both Rose and Virginia caught Dengue Fever (commonly known as Breakbone Fever), which is a disease contracted from mosquitos and often results in dangerously high fever. It damaged the girls’ hearts, and Virginia developed a prolapsed valve. Virginia’s body was weakened by the residual effects of the fever and by 1927 her condition had deteriorated beyond that of her sister. Sensing

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2Rose Piper, Interview by Richard Martin, 1995. This interview was conducted by Richard Martin in New York City on August 8, 1995. This is unpublished raw footage that is not copyrighted. This interview was essential in the construction of Piper’s life, as it is currently the only known compilation of material from her early life.

3Ibid.

Virginia’s death, Rose’s parents separated the twins and Piper was sent to stay with a friend. In September, right before her eleventh birthday, Virginia died. Virginia’s death was very hard on Piper. In a conversation with her father on the train headed to Virginia’s wake, Piper expressed a moment that shaped her entire art practice. She recalled: “I kept asking: How’s Virginia?” My dad responded, “The Good Lord has taken her.” Piper lamented, “That was a big mistake. Big, big mistake. At that moment, I stopped believing in God on the 3rd Avenue L at the age of eleven. That did it.” As she walked into the crowd of people for Virginia’s wake, she noticed that for the first time in their lives, she had on a different dress than her sister. She recalled years later that Virginia’s death was the cause of her serious separation anxiety. She said, “There is no closer relationship than an identical twin.” Anxiety developed as a result of the traumatic experience would affect Piper in future relationships.

Shortly after Virginia’s death, the family moved to the East Bronx into a historically Jewish neighborhood. Piper’s father decided to relocate the family because of the superb schooling available in the area and Piper easily made friends in the new neighborhood. In the height of the Harlem Renaissance, two houses on Elsmere Place were opened to educate black children. It is here that Piper first became friends with Martha Pendergrass who belonged to a wealthy family in the area. Piper said, “Martha introduced me to all of the high society Negroes. People who had servants to answer their door; during the depression too!” During her teenage years, Piper forged relationships with many of the community

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members. She was culturally and civicly attuned to “the New Negroes” thanks to her connection to black activist Adam Powell. Powell, a prominent civil rights leader in Harlem, was elected to the New York City Council as the city's first Black Council representative. Piper recalled, “They took us to all the Broadway plays. They introduced us to Orson Wells-the Harlem theater director, Can Deke, Cady Cullen, and Claude McKay.” Piper was immersed in the culture of the Harlem Renaissance firsthand. She recalled the night of the 1935 Harlem Race riot as a night not sodden in controversy but as an unfortunate blip in an otherwise joyful world. The cultural awareness she gained during these years was vital to the subject matter in her artwork.

In the early 1930’s Piper entered Hunter High School. As Piper recalled, “It was an all-girl’s school and I couldn’t stand it.” Because of her discontent, she left Hunter High School and went to Evander Childs School. There she majored in art and earned a four-year scholarship to Pratt Institute, which she received as an award for earning the highest graduating GPA in art. Following the recession, her father did not feel that art school was a

7“Adam Duning and family” US Census, 1860. Franklin County, North Eastern Division, Virginia.


9 Ibid. The significance of this event was the racial awareness Piper developed during the riot. The riot was a result of alleged beating of a 16-year-old Puerto Rican shoplifter. Rumors that the teenager was beaten to death sparked a demonstration that drew thousands and lead to mass looting primarily targeting white-owned businesses. Piper recalls that she did not feel particularly unsafe because she her ‘blackness’ was evident. Whereas her cousin Jenny, who appeared white, was forced to lay down on the floor of the car so she would not be attacked.

10 Ibid.
secure path for her future. Under family pressure, Piper was encouraged to choose a

discipline that was more ‘valuable than art’ and she declined the scholarship to Pratt.\textsuperscript{11} She
chose University of Chicago as an alternative to Pratt, but her parents could simply not
afford the tuition. “It was the Depression. We were really hard up. Dad lost all his money in
the 1929 market crash, he had invested quite a bit. So, I wound up at Hunter College much
against my will because it was all girls.”\textsuperscript{12} Piper began her studies at Hunter College with
the intention of earning a teaching degree. In her first two years, she completed all of the art
courses required for the degree, leaving only teaching courses for the remaining two years.
At this point, Piper recalled, “I said NO way and took every single art class they offered.
And it was the best thing I ever did.”\textsuperscript{13} Piper graduated in 1940 with a BFA art and a minor
in geometry. She also studied the German language. In 1940, after graduating from Hunter
College, she married Billy Piper and they stayed in New York City. Piper worked odd jobs
during her college career and continued after graduation. In 1942, Piper gave birth to her
son Steven and transitioned into staying home with him. In 1944, her husband Billy enlisted
for WWII and when he was deployed, Piper stayed in New York City.

\textsuperscript{11}Ibid. Although her family supported the arts, they did not feel it was a money making
career.

\textsuperscript{12}Rose Piper, Interview by Richard Martin, 1995.

\textsuperscript{13}Ibid.
CHAPTER 2
EARLY CAREER 1940s-1950s

A friend of mine said, “While Billy’s away, you have your mom to watch Steven, and you have income. Why don’t you just paint?” -Rose Piper1

For two solid years I had nothing to do but paint. It was the best time-really great. Most time in my life I had to dedicate to just painting-Rose Piper2

After Billy was deployed to fight in the war, Piper decided to focus on her painting career. In 1944, she began studying at the Arts Students League, which is an organization established by artists to train artists without the typical course structure of a university. 3 During her time at the League, Piper trained under many highly respected artists including, Yasuo Kuniyoshi (1893-1953), Vaclav Vytlcil (1892-1984), Charles Alston (1907-1977), and illustrator Arthur Lidov (1917-1990). 4 Unlike traditional art education of the time, where power structure placed the educator above the students, the Arts Students League was an environment where artist and instructor interactions were mutually beneficial. In turn, rapid innovations in style occurred from the constant exposure to new ideas.

During the 1940s, there were many social circumstances affecting the New York artist community. With World War II underway, racial tension circulated with the fear of


2Ibid.


invasion, resulting in rash actions against ‘alien’ members of the society. Piper clearly remembered the effect of anti-Japanese sentiment on Professor Kuniyoshi, Piper’s painting instructor during her time at the Arts Students League. Piper recalled: “I studied with Yasuo Kuniyoshi who was Japanese American, while other Japanese were being put into internment camps. He carried on and rightly so. An oriental girl in class painted a bird on a tree to Kuniyoshi cried: ‘The war is on and you are painting a bird on a tree?’” He encouraged Piper to tackle subject matter that was meaningful to her and not just aesthetically appealing. Kuniyoshi affected more than just the choice of content in Piper paintings. The body of work she created in during the 1940s bears many stylistic similarities with Kuniyoshi’s painting. He and the other instructors at the Arts Students League encouraged Piper to apply for fellowships to advance her artistic career.

In 1946 Piper was awarded a Rosenwald Fellowship, which was a grant established by the Rosenwald Foundation to allow artists of all categories to practice art full-time. In her application, she stated specifically how she intended to utilize the funds of the Fellowship:

Do a series of paintings depicting first, the folk Negro, urban and rural as he comments on himself in his blues. There is nothing sentimental about the blues. They are subjective, highly personal and charged with emotion. To anyone interested in learning the truth about the ‘happy, laughing child-like’ Negro, they are indispensable data. 

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By this time in her life, Piper had become a familiar figure in the Harlem art scene. Among the many intellectuals who had settled in Harlem during the period of the Harlem Renaissance was Sterling Brown (1901-1989). Piper was introduced to him by the poet Myron O’Higgins. Brown, an expert in black folklore, tutored her in the blues and advised her to seek out Race records in Harlem, another element which would shape her future work. As she discussed in her plan of work in her application for the Rosenwald Fellowship, she was intent to depict meaningful subject matter. Instructor Kuniyoshi would be a constant example and encouragement to give definition to what ‘meaningful art’ should be. The combination of music and art became central to this definition. She created a series entitled *Blues and Negro Folk Songs*. While working on these paintings, Piper stressed the importance of interaction with her peers. She claimed Charles “Spinky” Alston (1907-1977), an African American painter, sculptor, illustrator, muralist, and teacher, was her mentor. She visited his studio quite often. She recalled her time there saying,

I was so impressed. The Duke of Windsor visited the United States and stopped by his studio. It was one of the places to see and be seen. Spinky was a really wonderful guy. He would critique. I would call him down to critique and then jump down his throat and said ‘What do you know?’ ‘You’re wrong’ I would

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finally get him around to my way of thinking. It was fun to do. I guess I could really come on strong at times. But he was a really loyal friend.\textsuperscript{10}

Studios in New York were gathering places for artists. Piper really enjoyed this time in her life. As she reminisced, “The world was a great place to be in beside the war, beside the depression,”\textsuperscript{11} As Piper suggested, New York during the 1940s was a meeting place for some of the greatest minds in the art world. She remembered some of the most significant people she was introduced to during this time, “Jake Alston, Richmond Barthè (1901-1989)-who I first met with Adam Powell, Robert Blackburn (1920-2003), Jacob Lawrence (1917-2000), Ollie Harrington (1912-1995)-who was cartooning for the Amsterdam News.”\textsuperscript{12}

In 1947 Piper received her second Rosenwald Fellowship. Receipt of the second grant garnered Piper attention from local galleries. She met Michael Freilich at the RoKo Gallery through Glenn Chamberlin, who did a studio visit with her. Chamberlin thought Piper’s body of work was strong enough to warrant a solo exhibition, and although Piper was hesitant, she agreed to the exhibition. On Sunday September 28, 1947, Piper opened \textit{Blues and Negro Folk Songs} at the RoKo gallery.\textsuperscript{13}

\footnotesize
\textsuperscript{10}Rose Piper, Interview by Richard Martin, 1995.

\textsuperscript{11}Ibid.

\textsuperscript{12}Ibid.

\textsuperscript{13}Rose Piper, Art & Artist Files, The Museum of Modern Art Archives, [November 15, 2014]
Blues and Negro Folk Songs Series

*Blues and Negro Folk Songs* featured fourteen oil paintings completed under the Rosenwald Fellowship. The original exhibit card for the show (Figure 1) named the fourteen paintings and included a hand scrawled invitation for cocktails.\(^4\) Some of the paintings in the series included large, biomorphic figures and direct references to challenges faced by African-Americans in the South: Back Water, St. Louis Cyclone Blues, Conjur, I’m Gonna Take my Wings and Cleave the Air, Long, Long Time Freedom, The Death of Bessie Smith, Slow Down, Freight Train, Greivin Hearted and Empty Bed Blues (Figures 2-10).\(^5\) Thanks to the list of titles, I have been able to illustrate nine of the fourteen pictures, represented together here for the first time. Of these, I’m Gonna Take my Wings and Cleave the Air (Figure 5) was destroyed. Piper utilized angular elements to construct the background for the figures featured. Piper told a reporter that her paintings were, “impressions of the imaginative experiences evoked by the world of Negro folk songs, and not illustrative works or accompaniments.”\(^6\) Piper’s most well-known painting, Slow Down, Freight Train (Figure 8) incorporates many elements of the series. I will discuss Slow Down, Freight Train (Figure 8) then The Death of Bessie Smith (Figure 7) as they are

\(^4\) Ibid.

\(^5\) Originally each of these paintings was produced in color. However with the scarce source material available to Piper, it is hard to verify the correct coloring of some of the paintings.

two paintings from the *Blues and Negro Folk Song* Series about which there has been a surge of interest.

*Slow Down, Freight Train* (Figure 8), is a $29^{\frac{3}{4}} \times 23^{\frac{1}{8}}$ inch painting. A singular, highly stylized, seated African-American male figure extends into the painting from the lower left corner. His shirt, a bright red, is composed of varying sizes of triangular and other polygon shapes in various shades of red. Piper utilized this bold color as the focal point in the midline of the work. From the figure’s red shirt, the eye moves upward, following the curve of the figure’s elongated neck to his upturned oval head. His open mouth and head thrown back in anguish illustrate a telling expression of heartache. Aside from the vibrant red shirt, the painting is composed of a muted color palette using yellows and greens matching the mood of despair the figure displays. Piper capitalizes on a juxtaposition of light and dark in horizontals and verticals to create a sense of movement in the frame. Underneath the black pants of the extended leg of the figure, warm white floor boards diagonally recede, pulling the eye through the figure from the foreground to the background to meet a vertical plane of black that shoots up towards the top of the canvas. The plane of black splits the background of the canvas in half. To the right of the vertical plane is a gradation of horizontal rectangles from dark to light. What appears to be the window of the box car may represent hope for the future. The moment depicted is dark and bleak, but the lightening of the blocks is intended to show that this situation will improve with time. To the right of the vertical black plane is a pale green triangle in the top right hand corner containing power lines. Below the green triangle is a plane of landscape broken up into different geometric shapes by dark gradations of a grayish green. In the center of the plane is a hill that extends backward out of the picture plane. The receding shape reinforces
the box car’s forward movement by pulling the eye with outside of the picture plane. The effect creates a scene that appears to be whizzing past, putting the viewer in the same car as the figure on the moving freight train. With time, the viewer’s attention is divided between the moving scene around the train painted in the muted color palette and the space of the box car containing the bold red of the figure. Piper underscores the divided feeling by rendering the figure with curved lines, while the landscape and his surroundings are comprised of strictly straight horizontals and verticals. The discord between the straight and curvy lines enhanced by the stark difference of lights and darks throughout the mostly muted color palette achieves Piper’s intention of a somber scene depicting the departure to the city on the freight train.

*Slow Down, Freight Train* (Figure 8) received a surge of interest after it was acquired by the Ackland Art Museum at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 1990. Scholars Ann Gibson and Graham Lock make reference to this work as a testament to Piper’s artistic talent. Charles Millard, Curator of the Ackland Art Museum, began correspondence with Piper to gain insight into this work of art.17 In this dialogue, when asked about the subject of *Slow Down, Freight Train* (Figure 8) in relation to the inspiration of the painting (*Trixie Smith’s Freight Train Blues*), Piper responded: “The title of my painting is a woman’s plea for the train to slow down so she might go along with her man.”18 Piper’s painting, based on Smith’s song, depicts a problem faced by many southern

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African-Americans in the early 1900’s. In order to find work and support their families, men would leave their homes and travel to northern cities; the movement became commonly referred to as the Great Migration. Often, they were forced to leave behind their loved ones who could not afford to make the journey. Gibson was able to elicit a more expansive answer when she asked about this painting and Piper’s depiction of the blues and southern culture. Piper responded:

My family came out of the south, but what I knew about the south I learned from stories told by my mother and father and various relatives. I had to research the background for the Blues and work songs I used in my paintings. I didn’t know where to find authentic recordings. Sterling Brown [a professor at Howard University] told me to go to Harlem record stores and ask for ‘Race’ records. It was a new experience for me. What I remember so vividly is the strength of the Black woman. In my painting Slow Down, Freight Train it is the woman who wants the train to slow down so that she can get on it and go North with her man.19

The melancholy feeling surrounding these departures during the Great Migration is captured in Piper’s Slow Down, Freight Train (Figure 8). The large shapes and muted palette work together to create an overall feeling Piper attempted to capture in the scene.20

In the series Blues and Negro Folk Songs, Piper worked with the similar elements to achieve an iconographic consistency in the works.


20Richard Powell, Black Art and Culture in the 20th Century, (London, UK: Thames and Hudson, 1997), 156. Powell includes a formal description some of the elements of Slow Down, Freight Train. His eloquent description of the work points to references to the images, sounds, and sensations that the blues conjured.
Overall, the exhibition *Blues and Negro Folk Songs* was prosperous, earning Piper several reviews. She remarked of the success of her show saying, “It was quite successful and practically sold out. I received excellent reviews. In those days art was covered.” 21 She utilized subject matter that was relevant and close to home for many in the New York area. Scholar Ann Gibson credits art critic Thomas B. Hess as the bastion of Abstract Expressionism. Hess’s review of Piper’s work in *Art News* associated her work to the Abstract Expressionist movement characteristically. Hess wrote: “Early, luminous romantic canvases bring to mind her studies with Kuniyoshi at the Art Students League. The recent pictures are strong, flat, semi-abstract compositions, simple in design and somewhat mournful in their color harmonies.” 22 The reviewer for *Art Digest* focused more on the success of her overall achievement with the paintings. He wrote: “As paintings, the pictures are strong, affirmative, sound in composition and moodily emotional in color.” He continued: “As social statements they are equally successful because of their emotional impact, effective because they escape the shrillness that mars so much ‘social’ painting.” 23 Piper’s motivation to cover meaningful subjects led her to create social commentary about some issues that were not often discussed during the time. In *The Death of Bessie Smith* (Figure 7), Piper depicted her reaction to the death of jazz and blues singer Bessie Smith.

*The Death of Bessie Smith* (Figure 7) is a 25’’ x 30’’ oil on canvas painting which portrays singer Bessie Smith in her final moments after a tragic car accident. The


circumstances surrounding Smith’s death were long debated. It was rumored that because Smith was black, she was not given proper medical attention. Although eventually discredited, the suggested sequence of events proposed by John Hammond in the November 1937 edition of *Downbeat Magazine* was widely circulated in suspicion of foul play regarding the medical care Smith received following her car accident. Hammond wrote: “When finally she did arrive at the hospital she was refused treatments because of her color and bled to death while waiting for attention.”²⁴ In *The Death of Bessie Smith* (Figure 7), Piper depicted Smith as a large biomorphic form whose head is thrown back in anguish in this moment of agony. Piper rendered the figure has rendered silhouetted features but did not add humanistic signifiers like eyes or ears. Piper placed Smith in the foreground of the work and represented her exposed skin in a flat onyx color. This color accentuates Smith’s blackness. Smith’s black skin was ultimately believed to have been the deciding factor in her fate and her position on the canvas makes it impossible to ignore this characteristic. In contrast to this, other figures in the *Blues and Negro Folk Songs* series are rendered more realistically. Piper’s deliberate use of onyx to depict Bessie Smith’s skin interjected her position in the social commentary surrounding the circumstances of Smith’s death.

Formally, *The Death of Bessie Smith* (Figure 7) is similar to the other works in the *Blues and Negro Folk Songs* series. Piper sets a large figure as the focal point of the

²⁴John Hammond, “Did Bessie Smith Bleed to Death While Waiting for Medical Aid?” *Downbeat Magazine*, November 1937, 7. Although Hammond’s proposed accounts of Smith’s death were discounted, many maintained the opinion that Smith’s death was solely due to her skin color. As late as 1957, the story was still thought to hold a large amount of truth. In 1947, when Piper was making *Death of Bessie Smith*, the incident was controversial.
composition in the foreground employing strong angular geometric forms to construct the background. The color palette contains mostly muted teals, browns, and greens with clear expressive colors to draw attention to elements of the figure in the composition.\textsuperscript{25} Piper snakes a bright red line across the tilted head of Smith, which continues down to outline her extended arms. Behind Smith’s head is a bright yellow, halo-like form. Behind the halo-like form is a large pea green form with gear-like ridges on the left curvilinear side. A large, black circular form rests behind the form and mimics the gear-like ridges in the lower right hand corner of the canvas. Jutting between the green and black forms is a teal geometric rectangle, which extend diagonally toward the upper left corner of the canvas. One interpretation is that this area may represent the sidewalk that Smith was allegedly left to die on. Two grey cubes extend vertically out of the picture plane and could be symbolic of the hospital where Smith was refused treatment. Formally, the painting is consistent with the series in using emotive color and composition to comment on social issues in the early twentieth century.

**Paris**

After the receipt of her second Rosenwald Fellowship in 1947, Piper was able to travel to Paris to continue her education. In Paris, Piper’s exposure to art went beyond her formal studies with École des Beaux-Arts. She was part of the local art scene, which

\textsuperscript{25}Daniel Milnes, E-mail message to author, December 12, 2015. The coloration of the painting is often misleading in the reproductions of the painting. I have verified with the Kunstmuseum in Stuttgart who have the painting as part of the exhibition “I Got Rhythm: Art and Jazz since 1920” the official coloration. In other sources the painting shows pinks, reds, and purples that drastically change the somber mood in which the painting was most certainly intended to reflect.
enabled her to immerse herself in the ideas of the Modern movement.\textsuperscript{26} She said, “I went to Paris to study. I sat in on sketching course at École des Beaux-Arts. I met everybody in Paris.” \textsuperscript{27} Piper recalled that Aaron Bridgers (1918-2003) took a special interest in her and introduced her to influential people in Paris. Bridgers was an African-American jazz pianist who had moved to Paris in 1947. Bridgers was the bar pianist for the Mars Club in Paris and was on friendly terms with many of the Paris elite.\textsuperscript{28} On one of the visits Bridgers arranged, she recalled: “We went to the home of a famous dress manufacturer who had a Picasso under the bed and also a Mattise!” She continued: “He was a collector of everybody. We were smoking on a Louis Cass couch and he handed me an ash tray. I looked at it and knew it was also a Picasso.”\textsuperscript{29} During her time in Paris, Piper stayed on the pulse of the art scene.

\textsuperscript{26}Ann Gibson, “Universality and Difference in Women’s Abstract Painting: Krasner, Ryan, Sekula, Piper, and Streat,” \textit{The Yale Journal of Criticism} 8, (no. 1, Spring 1995), 103-125. Gibson raises a really interesting comparison of African American artists to American artists of European descent during the 1950s. Gibson felt artists of European descent were attempting to break from the academy of France and disown any European association. She believes that African Americans did not disown French ideals, rather they embraced them. France offered African Americans acceptance based on ability, not color. At the time, this was a luxury not available in the United States.

\textsuperscript{27}Rose Piper, Interview by Richard Martin, 1995.


\textsuperscript{29}Rose Piper, Interview by Richard Martin, 1995.
1948-1949 Back in the U.S.

In 1948 Piper returned to New York to find that her sublet apartment had been ransacked. The man who was subleasing the apartment destroyed many pictures, documents, personal belongings, and even a painting *I’m Gonna Take my Wings and Cleave the Air* (Figure 5) from the *Blues and Negro Folk Song Series.* Although a devastating blow for Piper, she refocused her energy into promoting her artwork from the *Blues and Negro Folk Songs* series. On April 4, 1948 the *Atlanta Constitution* announced Piper as the winner of the top cash prize for her figure painting *Grievin’ Hearted* (Figure 9). The annual competition held by Atlanta University included stark opposition making Piper’s first prize finish even more significant. As a woman, Piper felt that she was always treated as a second class citizen. By besting all of the men in her artistic circle the victory proved her equality as a talented artist. “I won first prize and a few noses were out of joint,” Piper recalled the award saying, “I beat the same boys in Romie’s Studio who would never include me. They didn’t take me seriously.” Piper was able to best applicants including Richmond Barthè, Jacob Lawrence, Bob Blackburn (1920-2003), and Hale Woodruff.

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30Khela Ransier, E-mail message to author, November 4, 2015. According to Ms. Ransier, the original painting was destroyed along with many other of Piper’s personal belongings. *I’m Gonna Take my Wings and Cleave the Air* (Figure 5) is a grayscale copy of the original painting. Currently, the original coloring of the painting is unknown. However, the figure and composition *I’m Gonna Take my Wings and Cleave the Air* (Figure 5) are a repeated motif in Piper’s artistic career.

31“Atlanta University Opens Art Exhibit” *The Atlanta Constitution*, pg. 8A April 4, 1948.

Word of her solo exhibition as a result of her Rosenwald Fellowship garnered her legitimacy in *The New York Times*. After the successful showing at Atlanta University, Piper exhibited in the 1949 Exhibition of Negro Artist at the RoKo Gallery in New York City. Two of the paintings from the Blues and Negro Folk Song Series were featured: *Empty Bed Blues* (Figure 10) and *Conjur* (Figure 4). *Art Digest* reviewed the exhibition and gave Piper recognition as part of the commentary saying, “Outstanding as usual are the simple, strong designs and controlled expressionism of Rose Piper.” At this point, Piper was truly accepted as a significant contributor in the national art scene.

The year 1948-1949 may well have marked the height of Piper’s artistic career, but the time was disastrous in her personal life. Personal events would ultimately end her production of fine art for nearly the next thirty years. In 1948, Piper divorced her husband Billy Piper. At this time, she was selling paintings and able to support herself solely from her artistic career. In 1949, Rose Piper married Glenn Ransier and they moved to Geneva,

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33 Graham Lock, “Blues on the Brush: Rose Piper’s Blues Negro Folk Song Paintings of the 1940s,” *International Review of African-American Art* 22, (no. 1, 2008), 18-29. Lock’s footnote clarifies that “the names were taken from the list of works in the original exhibition catalogue. Contrary to some reports, no works by Charles Alston or Romare Bearden are listed.”


NY so that Glenn could finish his degree. Later that year, her daughter Khela Ransier was born, and Piper devoted her time to raising her newborn while continuing to paint. Then Piper received a letter from a friend in New York stating that her father was dying from cancer and that her mother was displaying signs of senility and could no longer take care of Piper’s son Steven. 39 Glenn was beginning to show the early signs of a nervous breakdown, and after finishing his degree, the family moved to LaSalle Street in Manhattan, NY. Piper recalled this tumultuous time:

   I was in a situation. I was miserable. My mother went into a home, my father died, my brother got married and moved to California, my husband became scary and moved out, and THERE I WAS. No money. I had a seven year old and newborn baby. There I am. And people ask me-why did you give up painting? 40

Piper articulated her desire to be known as a world-class artist. However, she recognized that it was her responsibility to support her family. At the end of the 1940s, in order to generate a reliable income, Piper turned her attention to commercial art.


40Ibid.
CHAPTER 3
MIDDLE CAREER 1950s-1970s

I got into the knitting field when the miracle fiber first came out, textured polyester. It was the fiber that garments were made of where you could go into your shower, completely dressed, and come out just the way you entered. It was wonderful. Also, it had the reputation of lasting forever. And that was something I noticed after I retired. When I would be walking down Broadway near where I lived some shabby down at the heels man would come down staggering along. They would be kind of unkept and everything. But there is one thing: they would all be wearing polyester double knit fabrics and there wouldn’t be a spot, there wouldn’t be a tear, the creases would still be in the fabric. It was unbelievable.

-Rose Piper\(^1\)

The early 1950’s were a time of great distress for Piper. She was in desperate need of an income to support her young children. Although formally trained in art, Piper was reduced to apply for a job at a telephone company that required she take an intelligence test. She recalled the experience: “The lady on the phone said that: 1) I passed the intelligence test and my IQ was too high for the position and 2) My background was in art and I would not stay at the telephone company even though I promised to stay.” \(^2\) Rejection from the position motivated Piper to seek help from her friends to find a job. Her friend, mentor, and fellow artist Arthur Lidov (1917-1990) suggested Piper consider the greeting card

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business.³ Lidov believed the greeting card business would allow Piper to utilize the skills she acquired in her fine arts training as well as provide the income her family so urgently needed.

Ransier Studio Cards

In the early 1950s Piper, with help, founded Ransier Studio Cards. Piper possessed the training and creativity necessary to design the cards, but she lacked financial backing. She searched to secure capital and with the help of Lidov they found a banker. Piper remembered the man (but somehow not his name) saying, “He was a millionaire, lawyer, CPA, and banker but he didn’t know beans about the greeting card business.” ⁴ Despite his lack of artistic knowledge, he had confidence enough in Piper to underwrite the company she started, called Ransier Studio Cards. She was paid fifty dollars a week, which only partially supported herself and her two children; she moonlighted for other greeting card manufactures for extra money. ⁵ Ransier Studio Cards set up offices in Lincoln Center

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³Ibid. Lidov was not only a propelling force for Piper to start the greeting card business, but also was someone Piper says, “Taught her a lot.” She claims that he was a tough teacher but a very good one. They became friends when Piper’s daughter Khela was three. Piper’s extroverted nature led to friendships with others in the community that aided in her success. Another man she identified as having impact on her during her early years as a designer of greeting cards was Bayard Rustin. Rustin truly must be regarded as a master strategist and tireless activist for black social issues in America. Piper met Rustin when he lived in the back of a print shop. She recalled, “He had just been released from prison for protesting.” He and a fellow activist were released from prison after a hunger strike. Piper remembers him as “Bright, determined, and really poor.”


⁵Piper did not specifically name the other companies for which she provided occasional designs.
close to Central Park. 6 “I did all the work,” said Piper, “Designed the card: the sentiments as we called it in those days. I did the drawing, took care of the printing, bought card stock and sold cards.” 7 Piper was also an innovator. She claimed that she was the first to develop greeting cards in the ‘studio card’ size (large format).

_Greeting Card_ (Figure 11) is an example of the type of greeting card produced by _Ransier Studio Cards_. Cards were printed on a heavy stock paper and singularly folded. They were stamped on the back with the _Ransier Studio Cards_ emblem (Figure 11). Thematically, the cards range widely in subject matter, including birthday wishes, ‘thinking about you’, Christmas cards, among others. Like her paintings, the greeting cards included Piper’s signature on the cover. The signature appears differently on the different cards in the position and identifier. Unlike her paintings where Piper typically placed her signature on the lower left or lower right hand of the composition, greeting cards were signed as part of the composition. However, Piper never used her own name on any of the _Ransier Studio Cards_. Piper signed greeting cards under the identifiers ‘Rose’ and ‘Ransier’. In her signature, Piper clearly made a distinction between the two art forms. Unconsciously or not, she may well have wished to distance her “fine art” personality from her commercial work.

_Ransier Studio Cards_ kept Piper busy to the point of near exhaustion. Continuing to paint was out of the question. Her creative liberty at the company allowed her to continue to explore meaningful subject matter. Nevertheless, there were positive aspects to her

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7Ibid.
commercial card career. *Greeting Card* (Figure 12) revisits an African-American spiritual I’m Gonna Take my Wings and Cleave the Air (Figure 5) depicted in the *Blues and Negro Folk Song* series. This particular theme was depicted in every stage of Piper’s career.

*Greeting Card* (Figure 12) is a Christmas card featuring a central figure with arms and chin stretched upward. Compositionally, the figure in the foreground and a white oblong background are centered on the cover of the salmon-colored card. *Greeting Card* (Figure 12) and I’m Gonna Take my Wings and Cleave the Air (Figure 5) both focus on the moment the central figure stretches upward to open his wings. Piper rendered the figure in *Greeting Card* (Figure 12) more anatomically than in I’m Gonna Take my Wings and Cleave the Air (Figure 5) by defining his facial features. The powerful stance of the figure reiterates the strength of the winged warrior. The dynamic figure will take action and ownership in creating a better future for himself. *Greeting Card* (Figure 12) differs from I’m Gonna Take my Wings and Cleave the Air (Figure 5) stylistically. The figure in *Greeting Card* (Figure 12) is created in a stamp-like fashion allowing the salmon color of the background to occupy the negative space. In both *Greeting Card* (Figure 12) and I’m Gonna Take my Wings and Cleave the Air (Figure 5), Piper utilized curvilinear lines to construct the central figure. Similarly, both artworks employ geometric forms in the background to support the central figure. Other than the salmon hue background, only values of white and black are used in the greeting card. In composing *Greeting Card* (Figure 12) with a limited color...

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8Piper, Rose. Art & Artist Files, Khela Ransier, Private Collection, [December 15, 2014]. The illustration here is a scanned version of the original card which is actually solid black.

9I’m Gonna Take my Wings and Cleave the Air (Figure 5) [Early Career], Greeting Card (Figure 12) [Middle Career] and (Figure 19) *One of these mornings bright and fair’ goin’ to take my wings and cleave the air* [Late Career].
palette, Piper successfully created a striking visual effect with a focus on the central figure. The central figure becomes a signifier of the strength African-Americans possessed in the Great Migration. Working at *Ransier Studio Cards* allowed Piper to continue to her passion for creating meaningful artwork although on a smaller scale and in a different medium.

Although *Ransier Studio Cards* was a creative outlet for Piper and she earned some income from it, the company struggled due to the poor management by the banker. Piper reflected on the business saying, “We could have been very successful. But the banker wouldn’t pay the salesmen on time. So they wouldn’t sell them [greeting cards].” 10 Although Piper enjoyed the creative liberty she had at *Ransier Studio Cards*, she needed higher wages to support her family. Piper had a friend in the design business who recommended she consider print design. The friend set up a meeting with the boss of her company for Piper to inquire about a job opportunity. Piper went to the interview without knowing anything about the industry but was able to bring her greeting cards as testament to her artistic ability. Through her greeting card career, Piper had acquired transferable skills which made her an asset to other segments of the design business. The boss told her, “Well if you can design greeting cards as well as this, I’m sure you can design prints.” 11 Piper accepted a salary of sixty dollars a week, though still underpaid, she once again entered a design field with little direct knowledge of her product. Nevertheless, she would become a legacy known for her relentless creativity in the history of African-American...
textile design. Moreover, her name rapidly became the first choice for clients seeking a textile designer.

Textile Industry

Piper’s career in textiles spanned a twenty-five year period and included over ten design firms, some of which included *JJ Knitted Fabrics, Fred Levy Studio, William Heller, Text Five Knits, Inwood Lively Mills (Apex Mills), Lebanon Mills, Jarmel Knitting Company* and *Alamac Knitting Mills.* With textiles, there are many standard divisions of production which are consistent industry-wide. Producing the finished product includes: fabric designers, technicians, fashion designers and administration. Not all textile companies focused on producing the same type of fabric, so some companies had various specialty positions that concentrated in a particular type of fabric. However, the process

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13 Rose Ransier-Piper, “A woman’s hand [video recording]: designing textile in America,” Panel discussion moderated by Dorothy Cosonas, (Private Collection, October 18, 2000). There is not extensive discussion in what order Piper worked for each of the companies. She did state that every time she moved companies, she acquired a higher salary. Money was her motivator.

14 The aforementioned list is compiled from various sources as references to the knitting mills that Piper worked for during her time as a textile designer. To date, I have not been able to confirm her employment at any of the mills. The information is difficult to confirm because many of the knitting mills are no longer in existence. Many of the records were destroyed when the smaller mills were bought out by larger companies or folded due to economic pressures to outsource textile production. For example, my inquiry into Lebanon Mills in Providence, RI revealed that after the mill’s closing, it was converted into residential housing. Evidence into the specific artists designing for Lebanon Mills was currently unavailable; however it is possible that the papers located at the Pawtucket Library could reveal more insight of specific artists and designers.
was generally similar. Typically the process began with a fabric designer who created a design and made a pattern for the machines. The pattern was then passed along to a technician who operated the machine to manufacture the textile. From there, the textile was either sculpted into garments by the fashion designer or sold in large quantities as bolts of fabric. Administrators were responsible for the commercial success of the textiles including anticipating the next fashion trend. In many of the textile companies, employees changed positions as they rose through the ranks.

The first job Piper received in the design industry folded a month after she was hired, and she found herself unemployed again, later, she recalled: “It’s hard to describe the feeling of being scared to death. With two little kids to support, something took over me at that point.” Piper knew that she needed to ensure more secure employment, so she applied as a specialist for the Fred Levy Studio in 1953. At the time, Piper still had much to learn about the industry, but her brief experience in print design and her own self-confidence allowed her to earn $75 a week. Piper thanked her quick learning curve saying, “I had to surreptitiously find out the width for a half drop for a design. The skill I had, that I could do. So I did a lot of repeats when I began.” Piper’s art savvy enabled her to blossom quickly in the textiles business. Her technical skill was quickly noticed as she gained recognition for her innovation in design. Her fine arts training enabled her to quickly

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16 Rose Piper, Interview by Richard Martin, 1995. Piper describes the process of textile design known as a half drop where the pattern is repeated halfway down the side in the vertical direction. The half drop pattern repeat is the most common type of patterned fabric.

17 Ibid.
master the design process. After learning the responsibilities of her role as designer, she pushed herself to create intricate paisley designs which made her widely sought after in the industry. *Paisley jacquard* (Figure 13) is an example of a polyester double knit fabric that was designed by Piper. The swirling lines and intricate detail required a high level of ability from the designer. Piper recalled how she developed her ‘fine hand’ saying, “I got every foulard that came in. I would put it in repeat first which is how I became able to do the paisleys and curly cue without shaking. I developed a really steady fine hand doing that. I did hundreds.”

Technically, the process of creating the designs was a skill Piper honed as she produced many fabric samples. In order to create the design, Piper would often paint the pattern on fine graph paper with the aid of a magnifying glass. Four samples of various patterns on grid paper (Figure 14) give insight into the process in the beginning stages of design. The patterns, which are all in various stages of completion, show the tight grid pattern to which Piper transcribed her pattern design. The intricacy of the design required not only a fine hand to execute the pattern on the tiny proportions, but also a fine eye for detail. Each choice, in terms of coloration and design, is considered in order to create a desirable product for the consumer. Piper’s natural ability to create popular designs was partially responsible for her success in the textile industry. According to Pat Kirkham,

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18 Foulard is a soft fabric typically made of silk, rayon, cotton, or twill weave with printed design. Historically most scarves and neckties are made from this fabric. As accessories, these articles of clothing lend themselves to a more intricate design pattern.

design historian, “Piper became the most sought-after designer of knit fabrics.” Piper was confident in her abilities in creating marketable products. Her continued success in the textiles industry was her intimate knowledge of the machines that created the textiles.

In many cases, there was discrepancy in translating the completed design into the production of fabric. During Piper’s time as a textile designer, computers were unheard of and it was sometimes difficult to transfer the design by hand into workable measurements for the machine. Finding a designer who had a sophisticated understanding of the production process was a high priority for knitting mills. If designers were able to create patterns that required little manipulation, their rate of production was increased. Piper’s former experience in the greeting card business, where she took part in the entire production process, prompted her to explore the manufacturing process of the textile industry. She took a vested interest to learn the ins and outs of the machines, which thus transformed her design onto the fabric. Her interest in learning the machines gave her an advantage in the job market, but also encouraged her to push the boundaries in design. In the mills, Piper befriended the mechanics and they educated her on the technical workings of the machines. Piper recalled,

I knew the machines inside and out. I was a superb technician and that’s what counted then, before computers. Those mechanics made me strip down machines and put them back together. I was good, pure and simple, good and that made me

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21 Rose Ransier-Piper, “A woman’s hand [video recording]: designing textile in America,” Panel discussion moderated by Dorothy Cosonas, October 18, 2000. Piper indicates it was fortunate for her to get a job at Jarmel Knitting Mills
valuable. It increased the salary I made a lot because I had the reputation of genius. It wasn’t genius at all, it was just knowing the machines. I could send the mill [the design] exactly how it should be put up on the screen. The mechanics loved me. They really did.\textsuperscript{22}

*Four samples of various patterns on grid paper* (Figure 14) shows how Piper’s knowledge of the machine was applied in the creation of her fabric design. These designs dated June 8, 1959 are accompanied by Piper’s notes in the margins of the patched design patterns. A note to the left of the fabric design in the upper left hand corner indicates that the particular design was intended as the “Pattern on a tuck bar” for a “Circular knitting machine.”\textsuperscript{23} In *Four samples of various patterns on grid paper* (Figure 14), Piper incorporates strong geometrics as the base of her design. The different square and triangular forms are patched with color until an overall pattern is realized. Piper often constructed her compositions with alternating colored geometric shapes as seen in *Slow Down, Freight Train* (Figure 8) and *The Death of Bessie Smith* (Figure 7). Her knowledge of the knitting machine and solid foundation in design principles allowed her to produce a translatable design that required little adjusting by the machine operator.

Piper’s talent and adaptation of knit and print design principles propelled her career. She won numerous awards and rose through the ranks of the industry earning positions as

\textsuperscript{22}Rose Ransier-Piper, “A woman’s hand [video recording]: designing textile in America,” Panel discussion moderated by Dorothy Cosonas, October 18, 2000. Part of her statement was repeated in the interview that she gave reiterating the importance of having the working knowledge of the machine.

\textsuperscript{23}Rose Piper, Art & Artist Files, Khela Ransier, [December 15, 2014]. Figure 14: this collection of fabric designs was a scan that was included by Khela Ransier that is part of a larger file containing images of many of Piper’s artworks as well as some original artworks.
designer, stylist, and even senior vice president! In 1973, Piper won an award for winning the Knitted Textile Association’s First Annual Knit Competition. In (Figure 15) she is shown accepting her prize. Piper’s accolades gave her confidence in the job market. As a designer, she was very mobile, moving from company to company for higher salary offers. Piper described her mobility between companies as an organic occurrence where she was approached by recruiters who prompted her to have a conversation with them about her current position. Often, she would agree to interview with the prospective company and became attracted by the higher salary offer. She described an interview with Alamac Knitting Company where her reputation and grit garnered her an unprecedented salary. Piper recalled the interview,

So I trotted over to Alamac Knitting mills for an interview. I get there and the president, vice president and two lawyers were sitting there. There were at least two other top CEOs of the company there also. I was going for a job as a print designer! I had never seen anything like it. So we sit and talk. They asked how much I wanted. I told them $125 a week. They gasped and told me that they never paid designers that much. Well I let them know that’s what I wanted and that I was worth it. They saw all the fine work I had done and finally said, “We like your confidence, we will give you the job”

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24J. Michelle Hill-Campbell, “Uncovering a Legacy: African-American Textile Designers,” 20-24. The author notes that Piper received many awards for her textile designs and even acted as vice president for Jarmel Knitting Mills, one of the companies she worked for during her career as a textile designer. Interviews with Piper also allude to awards that she won but they are never named. In attempts to determine specifically the awards that she won, I contacted her daughter Khela to see if records still remained. To the best of her knowledge, she believed that thorough records were not kept. However, she recognizes that her ‘claim to fame’ was that she was in great demand and changed jobs frequently for the promise of higher salary.

25Pat Kirkham, Women Designers in the USA 1900-2000: Diversity and Difference, 131.

Piper’s skill and the successful career she worked hard to establish earned her a wage that many designers, particularly women, were denied. Piper is referenced many times in discussion of the gender inequality during the twentieth century. She first experienced the inequality in her early career in New York, when her contemporaries would gather together in studios and dismiss her opinion because she was a woman. In a *Women in Design forum* Piper was asked if she believed her career would have been easier if she were a man. She quipped, “It’s much better to be a man for the money, without a doubt. Besides they take the credit for what you do. You have to fight for recognition.”27 This sentiment continued as she experienced inequality in the workplace during her textile career due to gender discrimination. *Alamac Knitting Mills* was Piper’s final employer during her career as a textile designer.

Although Piper was hired by *Alamac Knitting Mills* as a print designer, soon after she started they decided not to do prints at all. As Piper had done many times in her career, she was forced to pick up a new trade. Alamac Knitting Mills had a designer in New England who specialized in knit design. By fortune, at the advent of the polyester knit revolution, Piper was training to become the knit designer for New York.28 She became very prolific in polyester knit design exclaiming, “I was there when this wonder fabric, polyester, took the knits industry by storm.”29 Piper created numerous design in men’s and

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women’s wear in the “wonder fabric”. Blistered knit (Figure 16) is an example of a pattern for men’s wear that Piper designed. Piper’s menswear patterns sold well and the fabric, made of polyester and wool, was often fashioned into suits. Blistered knit (Figure 16) features a diamond design encased by other diamonds of increasing size. Blistered knit (Figure 16) is a pattern with a row of diamonds beginning with a black central diamond encased by a white diamond outlined in brown. The white outline is encased by a black and white stippled diamond shrouded in brown. The stippled diamond is encased by a white diamond outlined in brown. Finally the outermost diamond of the row is a black diamond encased in brown. Piper links the row of diamonds to a row above and beneath opposite of the central row beginning with an outermost white diamond outlined in brown. Piper’s used a muted palette similar to the majority of her earlier painted work. Black and white are the base of this design accentuated by a brown. The pattern is softened by the addition of black and white stippled segments that lessen the contra positioning of the black and white sections.

Piper was conscious of color choice in her designs. She belonged to a color group with around thirty other women who were concerned with the changing color trends. She recalled one instance, “When a new season came around we would get all kind of information. I was sent to Paris to look at the colors and see what was going on. Every

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30Rose Ransier-Piper, “A woman’s hand [video recording]: designing textile in America,” Panel discussion moderated by Dorothy Cosonas, October 18, 2000. In the unpublished gallery talk Piper went through some of her most popular design patterns and remarked at the success of each particular design. Many of her designs sold multiple millions of yards. Some of the more popular fabrics that were used to make jackets sold upward of ten million yards.
season there was a major color or another that would show up and you had to have it."  

Piper’s ability to stay on the avant-garde of fashion design earned her the attention from designers as prestigious as Harry Ames of London, who had once been Fashion Designer to the Queen of England. Although double blister polyester knits were very popular, they were not Piper’s favorite fabric to design. She remembered years after she left the textile industry, “I used to watch bums walk down the street years after in my designs. Just awful crazy. But they sold.” Although Piper built an incredible career in textile design, ultimately it was the decline of the knitting industry in the United States that ended Piper’s career after a long battle over earning a higher wage.

Decline of the knitting industry followed Piper’s continuous negotiations for a higher salary at Alamac Knitting Mills. She was a very prolific designer and often generated four to five designs a day. After selling millions of yards of product, Piper felt entitled to a raise. She recalled, “Now I figured, I’m just the designer, there is a stylist over me getting all the credit. I went in and said, I want a raise: $150 a week. They told me, ‘we don’t even give our salesman $25 raise at a time.’ I was mad. I asked them you mean to tell me that your salesmen are more important than your designers?” Piper was awarded the raise despite the initial opposition from Alamac Knitting Mills. From there, she pursued any

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opportunity to increase her salary. Because of her popularity, there were often other job offers made. After each interview, she would return to Alamac Knitting Mills and threaten to resign if they did not match the salary offer. Finally, she was awarded the position of designer.

Piper’s promotion to designer came with a new set of rewards and challenges. She was finally publically recognized for her contributions to design. Her designs were covered by several magazines including Knit Directions and Women’s Wear Daily. Unfortunately, as a designer, Piper was forced to confront discrimination because of her gender. She specifically denied that her race placed a major part in the discrimination she experienced. She distinctly remembered a time after her promotion to designer where she discovered her male assistant was making more money than she. She recalled the situation:

They had no place for the accountants when they came to do the books and they put them in my design room. I had an assistant at the time-Mark Roth. They would sit in the room and we would talk. One of the accountants said, “You know Rose, your assistant is being paid more than you are.” Now, notice that. I have an assistant that is making more money than I am. He’s a man, I’m a woman. That did not go down well.

35 According to Linda Halls, in “Exhibit Honor Neglected Women of American Design” The Washington Post, pg. E-2. December 20, 2000. “African-American crafts of the period were considered expressions of a blended culture and thus were not collected.” Now they are being looked at through a different lens. She says now, “African-American textiles, graphics, costumes, quilts and other designs are to be appreciated because they are hybrids.”

36 Rose Piper, Interview by Richard Martin, 1995. Piper claimed that these magazines often worked with her to cover her designs and there is evidence in her presentations at FIT that the magazine spreads were created. However, to date, I have not been able to pinpoint the exact issues that the designs are in.

37 Ibid.
Ultimately, it was the constant struggle for more pay and recognition that caused Piper to retire from the textile industry. She retired from *Alamac Knitting Mills* after twenty-eight years in the industry. “It was twenty-eight years too long. But the pain was eased by the paycheck, I made good money.” 38 Free from financial constraints, Piper was able to return to her first love, fine art.

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CHAPTER 4
LATE CAREER 1970s-1990s

In 1977, I began painting as soon as the last job was over. I created a painting: Seventh Seal about the destruction of the garment industry. After I did a drawing: Self-portrait as a Young Designer [Stylist]. Those were the first two things I did after leaving the industry and then I put it behind me. I tried to forget about it. It wasn’t lovely, but it did save my life. I was able to support my children and send them to college. -Rose Piper

In 1977, when Piper no longer faced financial constraints, she resumed her focus on fine art. Piper was liberated from the necessity of an immediate income and built security for her children which enabled her to explore subject material she deemed important. Her initial artworks, Seventh Seal and Self-portrait as a Young Stylist (Figure 17), completed by 1978, were a therapeutic split from the textile industry. She recalled that immediately after completing her last consulting job for the textile industry, she went back to work painting. In these works, Piper represented her innermost feelings about the monstrosities of the industry. Specifically, in the Seventh Seal Piper recalled: “The destruction of the garment

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1Rose Ransier-Piper, “The Fine Art of Textile Design: African-American Textile Designers in the fashion and home furnishing industry,” (Gallery talk organized by J. Michelle Hill, Private Collection, September 30, 1995). In discussion of her return to fine art, Piper referred to the drawing as Self-portrait as a Young Designer. All other record of the Drawing identifies the work as Self-portrait as a Young Stylist.

2A grainy image of the Seventh Seal appears briefly in “The Fine Art of Textile Design: African-American Textile Designers in the fashion and home furnishing industry” Gallery talk on September 30, 1995. Piper briefly discusses the work as a reaction to her time in the textile industry. At present, I am not able to locate a quality still of the image nor locate a catalog of the exhibition where the work might be represented.
industry. It shows all of the evils coming down and the whole area being wiped out.” ³ The painting reflected a New York viewpoint of the crumbling textile industry. Outsourcing production accounted for the mass closing of textile mills across the upper northeast.

After Piper completed the *Seventh Seal*, she began work on a self-portrait entitled, *Self-portrait as a Young Stylist* (Figure 17). The ink drawing was completed on conventional eighteen-by-twenty-four-inch paper. Compositionally, Piper placed a centrally located figure, meant to represent Piper herself, looming over the scene atop a winged creature. The creature is constructed with a skull-like head with horns and an open mouth with protruding fangs. The body, tail, and feet of the creature appear bird-like but Piper mutates the structure with the addition of extra talons. The disproportionately large creature and the Piper-figure are surrounded by other winged mutations in the upper two thirds of the drawing. Below the central figure in the lower third of the drawing beasts of various depictions flank both sides of a diagonally receding platform. The platform extends from the central portion of the foreground and exits beyond the right-hand side of the paper implying a space beyond the material. Two human-like figures march toward the foreground in what appears to be a grotesque mockery of the traditional runway show. The human-like figures endure gaze from the audience which are all fixed toward the runway. Only Piper atop the winged creature is able to break the trance and turn her gaze elsewhere. In a gallery talk, Piper clarified some of the elements of the drawing. “I am riding a rooster with a death head. There are all kinds of horribles flying in the air and gruesome creatures

Piper depicted elements of the drawing in values of black and white: a technique she developed during her textile career similar to the pattern *Blistered knit* (Figure 16). In the M. Lee Stone auction catalog, the drawing is described as an, “Unusual self-portrait that reflects the artist’s desire to free herself from her dreaded work of designing fabrics”

Although Piper gained many useful skills in her commercial career, she was ready to break away from the constant grind to produce work. *Self-Portrait as a Young Stylist* (Figure 17) was Piper’s way of resolving her long career in the industry.

The years of commercial work had affected Piper’s technical abilities as a draughtsman. She quickly realized the need to sharpen her formal artistic skills which had been dulled by the lack of practice. Piper turned to the still life as a method of practice. The still life is a traditional teaching method often used to develop drawing ability among students. The still life process involves students transcribing a calculated arrangement of objects set up by the instructor. Typically the still life is identifiable by its consistency in composition. In 1978, Piper expanded into mixed media to create *Unbalanced Object Being Balanced* (Figure 18). Swann Auction Galleries refers to this piece as a, “Later surrealism

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6“Lot 531: Rose Piper’s: Self Portrait as a Young Stylist. 1978.” (Cincinnati, OH: Treadway Toomey Auctions, December 6, 2014). The catalog indicates that the drawing went up for auction on December 6, 2014 and remains unsold.

drawing that reflects the life struggles of Rose Piper, one of the most promising painters in
the late 1940s.” The visually complex piece combines iconographical images of many
cultures into a still life arrangement. As she did in Self-Portrait as a Young Stylist (Figure
17), in Unbalanced Objects Being Balanced (Figure 18) Piper employed a primarily white
and black value palette. Piper introduced pink as an accent color to highlight certain figures
or focal points within the composition. The drawing contains imagery of a crouching
masked figure behind a juggling Jesus, a hand supporting a platform with a prowling cat
supporting a grotesquely rendered nude figure and a doll like figure with a hat supporting a
platform with a boot resting on top. The unconventional combination of imagery and
disproportional scale of figures link the work to the Surrealist movement. On the left side
of the composition and in the lower center of the composition, Piper includes outlined
figures more consistent with the figures in her earlier work. However, the individual figures
included in the composition are constructed with a high level of acute detail. Author Leslie
King Hammond constructed an anthology of African-American female artists entitled,
Gumbo Ya Ya: Anthology of Contemporary African-American Women Artist. In the book,
she attributes Piper’s new focus on rendering detail as a testament to her time in the textile
industry. She said,

She discovered that many years of using graph paper when creating designs for
knitted fabric left her with a heightened facility for minute detail. She had always
been intrigued by the delicate, miniature details in the gold leaf-highlighted
religious illuminations of the Duc de Berry (the fifteenth-century patron of French
illustrators). As a child, she had collected illustrated Sunday School cards with the
enthusiasm that many children collect baseball cards. She loved the clear jewel-

8“Lot 188: Rose Piper (1917-2005) Unbalanced Objects Being Balanced,” (African-
like colors, the flowing robes of the biblical characters, and the ever-present gold leaf highlighting.”

In *Unbalanced Objects Being Balanced* (Figure 18), Piper shifted her style into more detail-oriented compositions. A shift away from the earlier works which were composed of broad forms, simple lines and muted color.

By 1983, Piper experimented with acrylic painting. Unlike oils which required a long period of time to dry and are ideal for blending, acrylic paint allowed Piper to include sharper detail more quickly. Her painting, *About Women* (Figure 19), is an interesting arrangement of stereotypical imagery associated with women from different cultures. The painting created in 1983 has a pendant painting entitled *About Men* compositionally reflective but comprised of imagery associated with men. In *About Women* (Figure 19), a doll-like figure is propped against a wall sitting on a stack of two books. The green book resting on the ground has an identifiable label reading *Cunningham’s Textbook of Anatomy*. The doll-like figure holds a yellow *bloomingdale’s* bag in her right hand and a fox-like creature in the left. A tribal African-like mother figure is positioned in front of the *bloomingdale’s* bag. To the left of the tribal figure is a blue and white figurine. The figurine is stylized in a Victorian manner and adorned in traditional garb. The gaze of the figurine and the fox-like creature in the doll’s left hand look up toward a wall hanging between

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10Rose Piper, Art & Artist Files, Khela Ransier, [December 15, 2014]. This image is a scan of a picture taken of the painting *About Women*. Ransier indicates in writing on the back of the photograph that she own the work. She also confirms the specifics of the work.

11*Cunningham’s* Textbook of Anatomy was an Oxford publication intended to account the study and teaching of anatomy.
them. The wall hanging is clearly a replication of Rogier van der Weyden’s *The Durán Madonna* from the Prado (Figure 20). Although seemingly random, Piper had a long time interest in the Flemish School of painters. King Hammond specified, “Especially Jan Van Eyck, Hugo Van der Goes, and Hans Memling for his religious paintings. As impressions of the imaginative experiences evoked by negro folk songs, her paintings are like the Dutch Old Masters, spiritual without being overtly religious or didactic.”

Piper’s deep rooted art historical knowledge helped her create meaningful compositions, with intentional representations and iconographical imagery. Her focus and ability to create sharply detailed imagery culminated in her 1988 *Slave Song Series*.

### Slave Song Series

In 1988, Rose Piper completed a series of ten small-scale acrylic paintings entitled *Slave Song Series*. *One of these mornings bright and fair’ goin’ to take my wings and cleave the air* (Figure 21) and *Go Down Neath, Easy An’ Bring My Servant Home* (Figure 22) exemplify key visual characteristics which are consistent throughout the entire series. Piper divided the series into two viewpoints of contemporary Black Americans. Five are similar to *One of these mornings bright and fair’ goin’ to take my wings and cleave the air* (Figure 21) in that they place a contemporary African-American figure in the context of an old slave song setting. According to Swann Auction Galleries record, *One of these morning so bright and fair goin’ to take my wings and cleave the air* (Figure 21), “Was the last of the important series of paintings by Rose Piper in her Slave Song series in which she

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revisited themes that made her early reputation.”  

13 As previously discussed in chapter three, Piper represented variations of the spiritual in every stage of her career. The version of the painting created in her late career rendered the central figure with the most human-like qualities. Another distinction worth noting is the detail in the background work in the late career painting. Although Piper placed an equal amount of emphasis on the central figure as she did in her early and middle-career paintings, the scene supporting the figure is highly illustrated in the late career painting. Conversely, the other five paintings are similar to *Go Down Neath, Easy An’ Bring My Servant Home* (Figure 22) where African-Americans in a contemporary setting are forced to reconcile modern life with the principles engrained in slave songs of the past. *Go Down Neath, Easy An; Bring My Servant Home* (Figure 22) depicted Piper’s local subway station on 96th Street, a skeletal figure of Death, dressed in a blue velvet robe and white lace gloves, waits to escort home a destitute woman, who sits crumpled in rags on the platform floor. According to scholar Graham Lock, “It’s an arresting image, and beautifully executed.”  

14 Piper focused on creating a meaningful body of work that reflected important issues. Piper spoke of this series:

> The current state of many inner-city Blacks is not unlike the desperate situation of their slave ancestors. It is particularly desperate because part of what has been lost is the fuel of determination to survive and keep the family together. Despite the enormous injustices and cruelties of slavery, in the past they were at least able to maintain a belief in the rewards of heavenly Paradise after death. This faith enabled yesterday’s slaves to rise above the horrors of everyday life. For many of the disadvantaged today, however, there is little or no belief in the promise of a

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better life. For many, escape to ‘freedom’ or ‘paradise’ is drugs, short term riches, and violence.\textsuperscript{15}

The issues that Piper confronted in \textit{Slave Song Series} were relevant to her life. Her choice of subject matter related back to inspiration from her exploration of Black culture. It was in reading John Lovell, Jr.’s book \textit{Black Song: The Forge and Flame} where Piper found the inspiration for \textit{Slave Song Series}. The paintings were based solely on printed lyrics. Piper confirmed that her focus for the series was the meaning of the lyrics, not the melodies. She confessed that she did not even know the tunes of several of the spirituals she had used.\textsuperscript{16}

Placing African-American figures in contemporary settings made the spiritual message of the lyrics relevant to the modern era.

\textit{Slave Song Series} is clearly different from everything Piper had previously created as an artist. Piper embraced her change in aesthetic and recognized how differently the works were from her early paintings, like \textit{Long Long Time Freedom} (Figure 6).\textsuperscript{17} Lock eloquently explains her shift in style saying, “Her style was drastically altered, the muted colors and semi-abstracted replaced now by a precisely detailed realism and altogether brighter palette, changes Piper attributed both to her experience in textile design (where she would work on tiny grid patterns) as well as to a shift to acrylics from the oils she had used

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\textsuperscript{17}Rose Piper, Curatorial File: “Slow Down, Freight Train: Rose Piper,” Ackland Art Museum, Chapel Hill, North Carolina, [September 14, 2015]. In a letter to curator Charles Millard she included a scan of the painting \textit{Long Long Time Freedom} as a visual comparison to her work in \textit{Slave Song Series}. In the letter, she identifies the changes in her style and includes \textit{Long Long Time Freedom} as a reference.
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in the 1940s.”

Piper was able to adapt not only her use of material but also her subject matter to reflect contemporary issues. Alexandra Shaw acclaimed Piper’s ability saying, “[Ms. Piper’s] paintings fuse technical prowess and meticulous detail with unleashed imagination. Piper is a native New Yorker whose arresting paintings transcend geographic boundaries and limitations of time.” Piper was a classically trained artist who often looked to art historical masters for inspiration. In *Slave Song Series*, Piper reiterated her shift in aesthetic interests from Picasso to the Flemish “Primitives” and the medieval tradition of the *Book of Hours*. In *Go Down Neath, Easy An’ Bring My Servant Home* (Figure 22) Piper applied gold to the painting much like the gold leafed pages in a *Book of Hours*. The subway was a location from childhood that linked Piper to the idea of heaven. At the age of eleven, Piper’s father informed her that her sister Virginia had been taken by the Lord. I would suggest, this moment was challenging for Piper and could account for her fascination with the portrayal of the divine. Piper’s *Slave Song Series* debuted in 1989 as part of a one woman show entitled *Rose Piper: Paintings and Works on Paper* at the Phelps-Stokes Fund in New York. The show featured, along with several unrelated paintings, *Slave Song Series*.

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18 Graham Lock, “Blues on the Brush: Rose Piper’s Blues Negro Folk Song Paintings of the 1940s,” *International Review of African-American Art* 22, 18-29. This particular notation is from a footnote of Locks that points to publicity material from the Primavera Gallery.


20 Graham Lock, “Blues on the Brush: Rose Piper’s Blues Negro Folk Song Paintings of the 1940s,” *International Review of African-American Art* 22, 18-29. This particular notation is from a footnote of Locks that points to publicity material from the Primavera Gallery.
Garnering Recognition

*Slave Song Series* propelled Piper back into the contemporary art scene after her return to fine art. Following her one-woman show at the Phelps-Stokes Fund in New York, Piper was included in more influential exhibitions. In 1991 three of Piper’s pieces were chosen as part of a large retrospective entitled *The Search for Freedom: African-American abstract painting 1945-1975* at the Kenkeleba Gallery in New York. The curated exhibition placed *Long, Long Time Freedom* (Figure 6), *Greivin Hearted* (Figure 9) and *The Death of Bessie Smith* (Figure 7) alongside pieces from Piper’s contemporaries: Charles Alston (1907-1977), Beauford Delaney (1901-1979), Romare Bearden (1911-1988), Hale Woodruff (1900-1980) and others as the primary leaders of African-American art in the late 1940s and 1950s. In the exhibition catalog, Dr. Ann Gibson highlights Piper’s early career and her relevancy to the art movement in pioneering the style. On June 28, 1991 art critic Roberta Smith reviewed the exhibition. She critiqued Piper’s work as, “Abstraction that could accommodate a clearly defined social subject.” As a whole, Smith felt the exhibition was ground-breaking, and she discussed some of the theoretical arguments raised by Gibson in the catalog essay. Piper’s insertion in such a high profile exhibition in the late stages of her career confirmed that her artwork was worthy of inclusion in the art historical narrative.

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23 Ibid.
In 1992, Piper was featured in another critically reviewed exhibition at the Bomani Gallery in San Francisco entitled *Slave Song and Gumbo Memories*. The exhibition featured Piper’s *Slave Song Series* along with a series entitled *Gumbo Memories* by artist Zemma Meacham. Critic Patrick O’Connor likened the exhibition to a collection of paintings that serve as both windows and mirrors. He said, “As windows, they are openings through which the viewer can see the panoramas the artist has created of the people and places from the realm of his or her own experience. As mirrors, paintings reflect the people and places from the realism of experience of the view himself.” Piper’s *Slave Song Series* was a powerful element in the exhibition because of her depiction of African-Americans in a contemporary context. The exhibition served as an insightful view of the part of the historical narrative of African-Americans.

Piper was thrilled to return to fine arts after a long and prosperous, but difficult, career in textiles. The impact textiles had on her as an artist is obvious in her painting entitled *African Dress* (Figure 23). The painting features a figure dressed in heavily detailed attire. The extreme utilization of color and pattern in the textile she depicted in *African Dress* (Figure 23) shows Piper’s dynamism as an artist. Muted color palette and large shapes were common in her design. She was able to produce textiles of a more vibrant nature. The acrylic and graphite work created by Piper was completed in 1994. At 14 x 11

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25 Ibid.

inches, this work features an African-American female dawning boldly patterned garb from the breast up against a neutral gray background. From the lower right hand corner of the work, her bust which fills the corner of the frame, extends diagonally up toward her head. Her head fills the central portion of the work, stopping just an inch from the upper left hand corner leaving negative gray space behind her. We view her from the side as she gazes intently in a downward diagonal through the central midline of the left hand side of the canvas. Her closed, left hand is raised to her slightly open mouth. The tension in her hand matches that of her face. Toward the top of her forehead is the bottom of a turban wrap that encases her head. The yellow-based wrap contains a mixture of black checkered and black striped sections that are broken up by strips of yellow connecting to circular red, white, black, and yellow spheres. The wrap is mimicked in boldness of pattern in the tunic like top the woman wears. The yellow-based tunic features small black and yellow checkered squares juxtaposed with squares of green, yellow, black, and a red chevron-like pattern. Where the arm and bottom of the work meet in the midline of the dress (which is also the center point on the bottom of the piece) a brownish yellow creates the basis for a rectangular strip running up to the woman’s collar bone. Resting on her collarbone, it a necklace made of large orbs resting on one another and made of an orangey color. The exposed areas of skin are shaded, indicating that there is a source of light from the left hand side of the work. According to the auction record the piece recently sold at the Swann Auction Galleries.\textsuperscript{27} Listed in the information is a statement from the auction regarding Piper’s \textit{African Dress} (Figure 23): “This drawing is a fitting homage to Piper’s long career

as a textile designer and colorist.” In her *African Dress* (Figure 23), it is evident how prominent a role textile design played in her life and career.

Piper’s return to fine arts after a long textile career allowed her to establish herself as an influential artist. Immediately following her time in the textile industry, she resolved her experience with the creation of the *Seventh Seal* and *Self-portrait as a Young Stylist* (Figure 17). After, she improved her technical skills and produced works with Surrealist arrangements of iconographical imagery. Piper honed her style in the creation of her 1989 *Slave Song Series* in a collection of small-sized paintings that propelled her back into the art scene. Toward the end of her painting career, Piper explored a multitude of various subjects and reflected on her time in the textile industry in the painting *African Dress* (Figure 22). Interestingly, after her return to fine arts, Piper’s style seemed to have drastically shifted from her original painting style. In her late career, Piper’s paintings moved away from the earlier works which were composed of broad forms, simple lines and muted color. Piper’s reclaimed fame did not dissipate after she stopped producing artwork. Until the final stages of her life, Piper was invited to participate in discussions about her contributions to American art.
CHAPTER 5
RELEVANCE

We will be showing her [Piper’s] work alongside Aaron Douglas, Archibald J. Motley amongst others. The show will also feature works by Henri Matisse, Otto Dix, Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, Piet Mondrian and Stuart Davis. An important aspect of the history of jazz is the interplay with blues. Given Rose Piper’s extensive work with blues as a topic of her painting and the fact that the singer Bessie Smith is depicted in the paintings, we feel that her work would be great for our show. –Daniel Milnes

Until the final stages of her life, Piper was invited to participate in discussions about her contributions to American art. After she retired, Piper was recognized not only for her contribution to fine art, but also her memorable impact on the textile industry. On October 18, 2001 Piper participated in a panel discussion held at the Fashion Institute of Technology entitled A woman’s hand: designing textile in America, where she and other notable women in the fashion industry traded perspectives on the business regarding their respective careers. The other panel members were: Ruth Adler Schnee (1923-), Nina Lewin, Nell Znamierowski (1919-), Ellen Mislove. In the discussion Piper gave an overview of some of her key contributions to the industry and included images of some of her most popular textile designs. The video was a moving insight to the pioneering women of the industry who rose to the challenge of establishing themselves as important designers.

1Rose Piper, Curatorial Exhibition File: “I Got Rhythm: Art and Jazz since 1920,” (Kunstmuseum Stuttgart, Stuttgart Germany), [December 8, 2015]

2Rose Ransier-Piper, “A woman’s hand [video recording]: designing textile in America,” Panel discussion moderated by Dorothy Cosonas, (Private Collection, October 18, 2000). There are many wonderful examples of Piper’s textiles visible which were discussed
In addition to acknowledgement for her work in textiles, Piper was recognized for her contribution to fine arts. In 2002, Piper was included in an exhibition entitled, *Rose Piper and Winfred Rembert: A pair of opposites*. The exhibition juxtaposed paintings and works on paper from Piper and Rembert in an exploration of cultural identity as both artists and African-Americans. ³ The exhibition catalog compared Piper’s late works to Northern Renaissance *vanitas*, paintings. Ideologically, Piper’s late works fall under the theme of *vanitas*, as they suggest that beauty is fleeting and that material concern should not be placed ahead of spiritual ones. Piper’s worldly understanding gave her an insight to the everyday struggle and her fine art training gave her the ability to express her ideas on canvas. She was determined to continue creating art so that others might confront the serious issues Piper depicted in her work. Unfortunately, Piper had a series of strokes after the turn of the new century which severely impaired her mobility and her memory.⁴ Piper died in a Connecticut nursing home on May 11, 2005.

After Piper’s death, her lifetime of work continued to garner attention. In 2009, Piper’s *Slow Dow, Freight Train* (Figure 8) was chosen as the iconic image for the Rosenwald Foundation retrospective and exhibition.⁵ As a result of the carefully designed

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³ Jones, Steven. *Rose Piper and Winfred Rembert: A Pair of Opposites*. (Grayslake, IL: College of Lake County, 2002).


⁵ Rose Piper, Art & Artist Files, Smithsonian American Art Museum/ National Portrait Gallery Library, Washington D.C. [March 04, 2015]. The digitized file contains some of the newspaper clippings and ephemera from exhibitions in which Piper participated. However
presentation and preservation of the piece by the Ackland Museum of art, many have been able to access the painting. In 2015, Piper’s painting was the inspiration for Howard L. Craft’s Off-Broadway play *Freight: The Five Incarnations of Abel Green*. An advertisement for the production read:

> The play, which runs at HERE Arts Center through August 9, was initially titled *The Minstrel*, the result of a playwriting class that had Craft create a 10-minute script based on an artwork of his choosing in the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill's museum. He gravitated towards Rose Piper's striking 1946 painting *Slow Down, Freight Train* and started asking questions. "What does it mean to be black in America for a particular class of black folk? Or for black males during this period of history?" ⁶

Piper’s artwork transcends time. Her ability to create meaningful subject matter endured during her lifetime resulting in artwork which still carries an important message. The art market reflects the interest in Piper’s work. Recently, *St. Louis Cyclone Blues* (Figure 3), a painting completed during her *Slave Song Series*, sold at auction for a record high for the artist.⁷

Retrospectively, Piper’s life and artistic career are relevant to the discussion of major movements in art history in Post War/ Contemporary American art. During her

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as with other small repositories of Piper’s information, the collection is small and difficult to navigate without a thorough understand of Piper’s legacy.


⁷“Lot 529: Rose Piper Young Woman’s Blues. 1947.” (Cincinnati, OH: Treadway Toomey Auctions), December 6, 2014. The painting was estimated at a value of $20,000- $30,000. The painting sold for $39, 650. I believe the auction company misidentified the painting in its title. By the photographs included in the Auction record, the painting was included in the 1947 ROKO gallery exhibition.
early career in New York, Piper’s paintings show not only the stylistic influence of her instructors, but also her ability to create meaningful commentaries about historical and contemporary social issues. In her middle career, Piper transferred the skills gained from her formal artistic training to a commercial career. She developed new skills which resulted in exploration of new designs and techniques, as well as artistic expression in new materials. After retiring from the textile industry, Piper combined her early art training with the skills she acquired in her textile career. Her art ultimately resulted in a variety of mediums that thematically challenged viewers to evaluate contemporary social issues. The sincerity in her artwork has endured. Rose Ransier Piper’s continuing success as an artist is a testament to her valuable inclusion in the history of American Art.
Figure 1: Rose Piper, *Exhibition Card*, 1947, Museum of Modern Art.
Figure 2: Rose Piper, *Back Water*, 1946, Oil on Canvas, 30” x 22”, Rose Piper Estate.
Figure 3: Rose Piper, *St. Louis Cyclone Blues*, 1947, Oil on Canvas, 25” x 30”, Private Collection.
Figure 4: Rose Piper, *Conjur*, 1947, Oil on Canvas, 30” x 25”.
Figure 5: Rose Piper, *I’m Gonna Take my Wings and Cleave the Air*, 1947, Oil on Canvas, Original Destroyed 1947-1948 (Black and White Copy).
Figure 6: Rose Piper, *Long, Long Time Freedom*, 1947, Oil on Canvas, 30” x 36”, (Black and White Copy).
Figure 7: Rose Piper, *The Death of Bessie Smith*, 1947, Oil on Canvas, 25” x 30”, Private Collection.
Figure 8: Rose Piper, *Slow Down, Freight Train*, 1946-1947, Oil on Canvas, 29 ½” x 23 1/6”, Ackland Art Museum.
Figure 9: Rose Piper, *Grievin Hearted*, 1947, Oil on Canvas, 36” x 30”, Private Collection.
Figure 10: Rose Piper, *Empty Bed Blues*, 1946, Oil on Canvas, 40” x 29” (Black and White Copy).
Figure 11: Rose Piper, *Greeting Card*, 1950-1953, Cardstock, 2” x 6”, Private Collection.
Figure 12: Rose Piper, *Greeting Card*, 1950-1953, Cardstock, 2” x 6”, Private Collection.
Figure 13: Rose Piper, *Paisley Jacquard*, 1975, polyester double knit.
Figure 14: Rose Piper, *Four samples of various patterns on grid paper*, 1959, grid paper, Private Collection.
Figure 15: Rose (Ransier) Piper receiving award for winning the Knitted Textile Association’s First Annual Knit Competition (1973).
Figure 16: Rose Piper, *Blistered Knit*, 1971, polyester and wool.
Figure 17: Rose Piper, *Self Portrait As a Young Stylist*, 1978, Ink on Paper, 18” x 24”, Private Collection.
Figure 18: Rose Piper, *Unbalanced Objects Being Balanced*, 1978, Mixed Media on Paper, 14” x 11”, Private Collection.
Figure 19: Rose Piper, *About Women*, 1983, Acrylic on Canvas, 19” x 23”, Private Collection.
Figure 20: Rogier van der Weyden, *The Durán Madonna*, oil on oak wood, circa 1435–1438, Museo Nacional Del Prado.
Figure 21: Rose Piper, *One of these mornings bright and fair goin’ to take my wings and cleave the air*, 1988, Acrylic on Masonite, 11 ¾ ” x 9”, Private Collection.
Figure 22: Rose Piper, *Go Down Neath, Easy An’ Bring My Servant Home*, 1988, Acrylic and gold on Masonite, 12” x 9”, Private Collection.
Figure 23: Rose Piper, *African Dress*, 1994, Acrylic and graphite, 14” x 11”, Private Collection.
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VITA
Since graduating with her bachelor’s degree in History with minors in art and art history from McKendree University, Meghan has entered into graduate studies to pursue a curating or teaching career. As a graduate student at the University of Missouri–Kansas City, she earned a Graduate Teaching Assistantship position for the Art & Art History Department working in the Visual Resources library and conducting research. She served as treasurer of the Graduate Art History Association (GAHA), while managing the Todd Weiner Gallery in the Crossroads Arts District in Kansas City, fostering her interest in contemporary art. She co-curated the exhibition *Body-Mind Entente* which took place in the UMKC Gallery of Art in January–February 2016. Constructed by GAHA from the ground up, the exhibition took an interdisciplinary approach in exploring the parallels between art and science, and it helped strengthen the bonds between the UMKC Art & Art History Department and the UMKC School of Medicine. After completing her Master of Arts degree, she plans to continue writing critically about contemporary art and pursue a doctoral degree in art history.