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Black Art Library spreads the word about Black artists one book at a time

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Scroll through Asmaa Walton's Black Art Library page on Instagram and you'll see post after post with her signature pose — two arms holding out books about different Black visual artists.

It isn't really a pose. It's a subtle invitation — an invitation to check out books you often can't find at your local bookstore or even Amazon, books about Black artists who haven't always gotten the spotlight.

Walton's unique collection of 500 books (and growing) called Black Art Library casts a rare spotlight on Black artists and the books that exist about their work. It's become a traveling museum exhibition, displayed not just in Michigan but across the country.

Walton, 27, an art education graduate of Michigan State University who grew up in Detroit and still lives there, just wrapped up an exhibition of her books at a Cleveland art gallery. And in 2022, the collection will be on display in Texas, first at a gallery in San Antonio and then at a Houston library. She's also been tapped to curate a special collection of books at The Shepherd, a new arts center being created in a former church by the Library Street Collective on Detroit's east side.

Walton, who also has a masters degree in Arts Politics and has also had fellowships at art museums in Toledo and St. Louis, said it was important to her to create a collection of books that isn't just about artists everyone has heard of, she said.

"I've also been trying to collect books on artists that people have never really learned about, artists that really didn't get that spotlight that they deserved," said Walton. "A lot of those artists aren't living anymore so the books that exist may be the only books that will be made about them. I've wanted to be able to highlight those artists."

Eventually, Walton would like to open her own brick and mortar space to display her collection in the city but she's still fundraising and looking for the right location.

"Until I have my own space, I think it's a really good idea to be able to travel the collection to other places, to other communities, so more people can see it and engage with it," she said.

In the meantime, Walton also has a small capsule collection of 80 books now on display at the Bottega Veneta, a popup market in an old firehouse on Bagley Street in Detroit's Corktown neighborhood. To give it a local twist, all of the books are from two Detroit publishing companies that focused on printing books from Black artists, Broadside and Lotus.

The idea for Black Art Library came to Walton around December of 2019 and she knew she wanted to start it the following February.

"The past two years before that, every year during Black History Month, on my personal Instagram page, I would make a different post about a different Black artist every day," said Walton. "I was like, 'This is a way to teach them (her friends and followers on social media) something. They might find it interesting. They might want to look further.'"

Eventually, she liked the idea of sharing art books about Black artists. She'd already been a big fan of art books, asking for them for her birthday and holidays.

"I thought maybe art books could be a good way to share that information," she said. "I thought 'Maybe I can build a collection of books.' I had no idea what I'd do with it or how'd I'd keep it going."

Today, she has 11,000 followers on Instagram. She finds books wherever she can: from online booksellers, used bookstores, Facebook marketplace and elsewhere. She had her first museum exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit in February of 2021.

Her collection includes books on a mix of artists, including Romare Bearden, Beauford Delaney, Kara Walker, Betye Saar and more. She has a few books on Detroit's Tyree Guyton.

"I wouldn't have been able to just focus on Black artists from Detroit just because there just aren't enough of those books that exist," Walton said. "That's why I knew I had to

expand it, though I knew I wanted the project to be based here. A lot of these books — they don't exist yet. Now, more of them are being made about Black artists, especially Black artists working now."

Anthony Curis, owner of Library Street Collective, calls Walton's collection really unique. That's one of the reasons he and his wife, JJ, reached out to Walton about curating a permanent collection of 800-1000 books, records and more in a library space at The Shepherd. It will focus on artists of color who've made significant contributions to Michigan.

"She'll also have a lot of different programming with the community there — whether it's artist talks, or with different stakeholders coming and speaking to the neighborhood," he said.

Walton said museums and galleries have also played a role in why many Black artists haven't gotten their due. She cites folk artist Clementine Walker, who died in 1988. She had an exhibition at a large museum but "she wasn't able to see her own show because she was Black," she said.

"When the big museums and the galleries aren't talking about these Black artists, no one really cares about them," she said. "...The art world depends on that buzz. If no one is going to see your shows or reviewing your work, it doesn't really matter. I think that's what held back a lot of Black artists."

But Walton is helping change that one book at a time. With a permanent space for her collection eventually, people will be able to interact with her books (she wouldn't lend them out given how rare many are). She also recently received a \$10,000 grant from the Knight Foundation to build a website presence.

"There isn't really anything like this," said Walton. "...It's really exciting to see the different ways it's expanding and people are finding out about it."

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Black Art Library

On Instagram, go to @blackartlibrary.