

Curator's Choice: Kara Walker's *The Occupation of Alexandria*, 2005

Last year the Georgetown University Art Collection fortuitously acquired one of the iconic prints from Kara Walker's 2005 portfolio *Harper's Pictorial History of the Civil War (Annotated)* through the Barbara Krakow Gallery in New York. On oversized paper measuring 53 by 39 inches, Walker created this series with black figure silhouettes silkscreened against reproductions of landscape scenes published in Alfred H. Guernsey and Henry M. Alden's *Harper's Pictorial History of the Civil War* (1866-68). Walker's portfolio of 15 scenes was printed by and published at Columbia's LeRoy Neiman Center for Print Studies. Print Club members may recall seeing them installed in the Smithsonian American Art Museum's "Multiplicity" exhibition in 2011, where they are part of the permanent collection. That excellent exhibition was curated by long-time WPC advisor Joann Moser.

Walker's silhouettes address problems of racial and gender stereotypes, violence, and exploitation. Walker enlarged original woodcuts from *Harper's Weekly* using offset lithography and then layered silhouetted shapes of varied human (and some Bosch-like) forms juxtaposed against backdrops. Selected for Georgetown's collection because of its geographical proximity, *The Occupation of Alexandria* depicts columns of soldiers marching down a wide avenue by the harbor while steamboats hover in the Potomac; onlookers react in shock and excitement. In the right foreground, Walker added the nude figure of an enslaved woman kneeling, with a child strangely emerging out of her back.

Profile portraits cut from black paper were introduced to America in the Colonial period and remained an inexpensive and popular means to capture a likeness during the first half of the nineteenth century before photographic technology became widespread. The French-born artist Auguste Edouart (1789-1861) cut more than 4,000 likenesses from black paper during his decade in America from 1839 to 1849, including four presidents, five Supreme Court justices, six state governors, and a cadre of public officials. Silhouettes continued to appear in interior décor and children's book illustrations, and the German craft of paper cutting, called *Scherenschnitte*, was popularized in nineteenth-century picture books.

Walker's work is also drawn from German fairy tales, historical narratives, and popular and commercial culture. Her elegantly shaped figures arranged in panoramas subtly confront audiences with racial stereotypes lingering in contemporary American consciousness since the era of slavery. Walker's inventive use of the silhouette is an effective means to convey challenging social ills, but has sometimes resulted in controversy. Critics have argued that Walker herself is racist. She has also met with displeasure among the generation of African-Americans who struggled during the Civil Rights era, as they had worked to eradicate such imagery.

Kara Walker became aware of these transformative issues when she moved with her family to Atlanta at the age of thirteen. Her first major artistic achievement was a response to the nearby Civil War monument, Stone Mountain, and the sweeping narrative of Margaret Mead's *Gone With the Wind*. Entitled *Gone: An Historical Romance of Civil War as it Occurred Between the Dusky Thighs of a Young Negress and Her Heart*, Walker's highly acclaimed mural was installed at New York's Drawing Center in 1994. Shortly thereafter, she became one of the youngest artists to receive the prestigious MacArthur Fellowship.

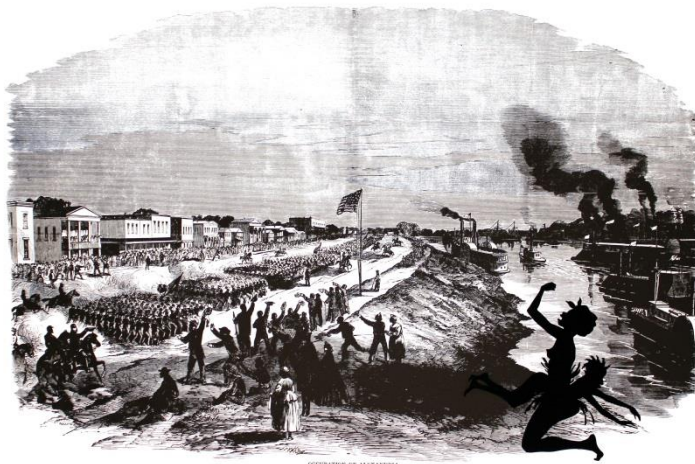
With remarkable creativity and imagination, Kara Walker makes her vivid silhouettes in one sitting by hand-cutting the black paper without drawing outlines, often while seated on the floor. Thus, the figures come to life straight from the artist's imagination with little if any preliminary work. She has described the process as "stream of consciousness," in which she gathers pieces of characters and experiences, and forms emerge spontaneously during the cutting process. Her installation work has included moving images, her own voiced narrative, film animation, and Indonesian-inspired shadow puppets. Her 2003 exhibition, "Narratives of a Negress" at the Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery, Skidmore College, in collaboration with the Williams College Museum of Art, cleverly involved viewers. As they walked through the gallery, visitors intersected with beams of projected light, casting their forms against the wall with the life-sized cut-paper narrative. Most recently Walker installed a monumental, white sugar sculpture of a sphinx with the head of a kerchiefed "mammy" in the Domino Sugar factory in Williamsburg, Brooklyn before the building's demolition in 2014.

Born in 1969 and hailed as one of today's most challenging and productive American artists, Walker earned her BFA in 1991 from the Atlanta College of Art and her MFA from the Rhode Island School of Design in 1994. She has been making headlines and exhibiting in galleries and public venues ever since. Her first museum survey in 2007 was organized by the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis and traveled to the Whitney Museum in New York and other venues. She has taught on the Visual Arts faculty of Columbia University since 2001, was elected into the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 2012, and was appointed the Tepper Chair of Rutgers University's Mason Gross School of the Arts in 2015.

Although Georgetown's acquisition is not on permanent display due to its fragility as a work on paper, visitors may request a viewing appointment at the Booth Family Center for Special Collections in Lauinger Library. The timely acquisition of *The Occupation of Alexandria* coinciding with the University's recent formation of a working group on Slavery, Reconciliation and Imagination presents a further opportunity for the Georgetown community to discover Walker's powerful and thought-provoking work.

LULEN WALKER

Lulen Walker is the Art Curator in the Booth Family Center for Special Collections at Georgetown University Lauinger Library. She has curated 27 exhibitions of graphic art from the University's collection, which numbers approximately 15,000 works on paper. Prior to her role at Georgetown, Ms. Walker was curatorial assistant in the Department of Prints and Photographs at the National Portrait Gallery, where she curated an exhibition on Josephine Baker in 1997.



Kara Walker, *The Occupation of Alexandria*, 2005, offset lithography and silkscreen, edition of 35. From the portfolio *Harper's Pictorial History of the Civil War (Annotated)*, 2015 University Purchase.