



Norma Morgan in Context

Lyman Allyn Art Museum
January 13 – April 7, 2024



Norma Morgan
Self-Portrait, 1966
Acrylic on Masonite
17 ½ x 13 ½ inches
Donnell and Dorothea Walker Collection
of African American Art

INTRODUCTION

We are honored to present and celebrate the work of the Connecticut-born artist Norma Morgan (American, 1928–2017), showing her arresting art alongside that of her teachers, colleagues, and other artistic influences. By exploring various threads of Morgan’s work, this exhibition considers her multifaceted identity as a Black female landscape artist and printmaker working at home and abroad.

Passion pushes people to do great work, even under difficult circumstances. As an artist, Norma Morgan brimmed with passion and an appreciation for nature’s awesome power. This passion, this quiet drive as evidenced in her work, may be at the root of why esteemed collectors like Michael Butler, Donnell Walker, and Kerry Davis have helped to bring this underrecognized artist to the fore. We are deeply indebted to them for their guidance in developing this exhibition and for their generous loans.

We are also grateful to the Woodstock Artists Association and Museum for facilitating loans from their recent exhibition *Norma Morgan: In the Moors and Catskills*, and to art historian Bruce Weber, Ph.D., for adapting his scholarship about Norma Morgan for our use here.

Sam Quigley, Director
Lyman Allyn Art Museum

Cover
Norma Morgan
Detail of *Moor Country–Nantucket Island, Massachusetts*, 2001
Watercolor on paper
11 x 15 inches
The Michael K. and Marian E. Butler Collection

NORMA MORGAN: A BRIEF OVERVIEW

by Bruce Weber, Ph.D., Independent Art Historian

Born and raised in New Haven, Connecticut, Norma Morgan (1928-2017) was a fascinating artist who lived and worked in Great Britain, New York City, and Woodstock, New York. Morgan's prints, watercolors, and oil and acrylic paintings span more than six decades and encompass abstractions, landscapes, and figurative and portrait subjects. After briefly experimenting with abstraction in the late 1940s, she produced landscapes of Great Britain and the United States, and pictures of figures in action. Later in her career she depicted landscapes of upstate New York, as well as likenesses of family members and imaginative portraits of abolitionist and Civil Rights icons.

Norma Morgan first picked up a brush at the age of nine, and was later encouraged to pursue drawing and painting at the Trinity School in New Rochelle, New York, where she and her mother lived for several years. Morgan later won recognition for her artwork and was art editor of the student magazine at James Hillhouse High School in New Haven. After graduating from high school in 1946, she attended the Whitney School of Art in New Haven.

In 1947, Morgan and her mother moved to Manhattan. For two years Morgan attended the morning life class at the Art Students League with Julian E. Levi, and she spent afternoons studying with Hans Hofmann at his school in Greenwich Village. She then joined William Stanley Hayter's Atelier 17, which pointed the way for new creative possibilities in printmaking. Hayter emphasized intaglio techniques (engraving, etching, and dry point), and Morgan subsequently developed a passion for engraving, which spanned the rest of her career.

< detail of *A Catskill Winter*



Norma Morgan
Sojourner Truth, Spirit of the Mountain, 1998
Hand-colored engraving on paper
18 x 35 inches
Kerry and C. Betty Davis Collection



Norma Morgan
A Catskill Winter, 1983
Engraving on paper
11 x 15 inches
Courtesy of Woodstock Artists
Association & Museum

With the support of several prestigious grants and fellowships, Morgan spent most of 1951-1953 and 1961-1966 working in north and southwest England and the Scottish Highlands. There she retraced some locations of novels by Thomas Hardy, Emily Brontë, Charlotte Brontë, and Daphne du Maurier, which inspired themes in her art. Morgan also admired the romantic Scottish landscapes by the 19th-century African American painter Robert S. Duncanson. Over the course of her career, Morgan frequently hand colored her engravings, aware of precedents such as 19th century British stipple prints and the American firm of Currier and Ives. She was also influenced stylistically by the atmospheric watercolors of Joseph Mallord William Turner. Victorian fairy paintings by Richard Dadd and others likely inspired her to include representations of tiny, imaginative figures in many of her pictures.



Norma Morgan
Wild, 1952
 Copper plate engraving on paper
 7 ¾ x 12 ¾ inches
 The Michael K. and Marian E.
 Butler Collection

Morgan's landscapes of England and Scotland feature craggy terrains and windswept moors, vistas of rugged hills dotted with cabins, and the unique rock formations called tors. She emphasized physical decay and erosion, noting, "Old buildings, hills and the like all yield a good source for exploration."¹ In Great Britain, Morgan filled notebooks with plein-air sketches that she utilized for engravings and watercolors in her local studio. She later turned to these notebooks for inspiration when she was back in the United States.

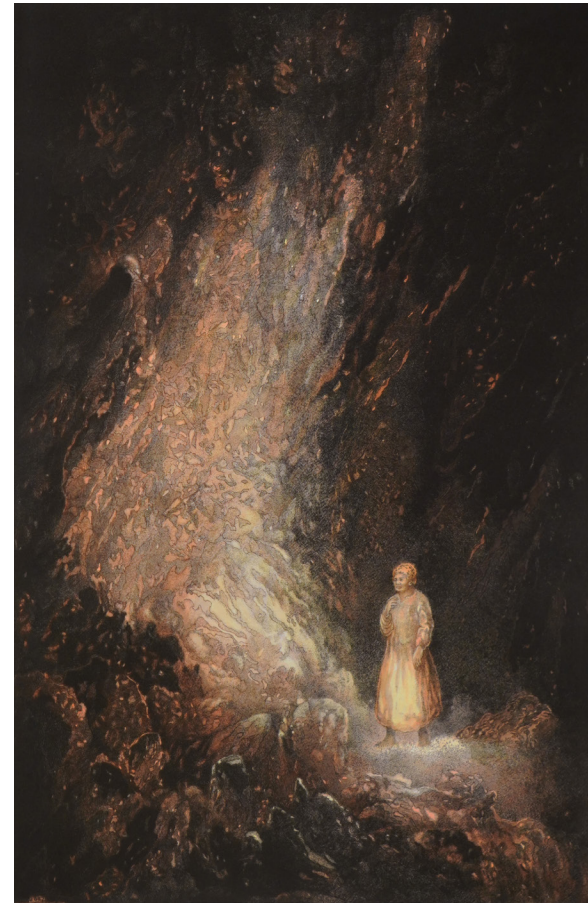
¹ Kerry Davis, "Interview with Ms. Norma Morgan – Engraver, Painter, Printmaker," 8. I would like to thank Kerry Davis for providing a transcript of his unpublished interview of 2012 with Morgan.



Norma Morgan
Granite Tor, 1954
 Engraving and aquatint on paper
 14 ½ x 17 ¼ inches
 The Michael K. and Marian E. Butler Collection



Norma Morgan
A Troll, Kaaterskill Clove, 1987
Watercolor on paper
14 $\frac{3}{8}$ x 10 $\frac{3}{8}$ inches
Dolan/Maxwell



Norma Morgan
Harriet Tubman, 1983
Hand-colored engraving on paper
25 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 19 $\frac{1}{4}$ inches
Kerry and C. Betty Davis Collection

In 1969, Morgan began to divide her time between New York City and Woodstock. She was drawn upstate by her love of the Catskill landscape and her enjoyment of hiking, camping, and other outdoor activities. The artist created prints, watercolors and paintings of the varied landscapes of the Catskills in a romantic spirit informed by her time in England and Scotland, and by the landscapes of the 19th-century Hudson River School, whose work undoubtedly drew Morgan to the area. Morgan also incorporated imaginary images of trolls, wood sprites and elves into her Catskill landscapes, along with fantastic forms which appear in rock and tree formations.

In 1983 and 1998, Morgan created imaginative hand-colored engraved portraits of Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth—two rare works by Morgan of key figures in African American history, both situated in the artist’s typically craggy and eroded landscape. As art historian Amalia Amaki notes, Tubman’s location in a Golgotha-like valley was “accentuating her spiritual assignment as ‘the Moses of her people.’” The angular and mystical light in which Morgan placed Truth, “emphasize[s] her pilgrimage, mission and spiritual destiny.”²

Around 2010, Morgan stopped coming to Woodstock. By that time her mother Ethel was ailing and died the following year. Four years later, Norma Morgan moved into a retirement facility in New Britain, Connecticut, where she died in October of 2017.

² Amalia Amaki, “Norma Morgan’s Sanctuary,” essay in *Norma Morgan: Enchanted World* (Easton, Md.: Academy Art Museum, 2021), pp. 9, 10.



< detail of *Vixen Tor*

NORMA MORGAN IN CONTEXT

by Tanya Pohrt, Ph.D., Curator

A visionary African American artist from New Haven, Connecticut, Norma Morgan (American, 1928–2017) approached landscape with a sense of awe and a reverence towards nature. Her evocative prints and watercolors present powerful and expressive landscapes filled with texture and atmosphere. Norma Morgan did not operate as part of a firm group or artistic movement, yet she overlapped and intersected with many contemporaries, and her work draws on a variety of ideas and artistic influences. Inspired by the Romantic tradition and the history, literature and art of the British Isles, Morgan spent several years in the United Kingdom rendering the wild beauty of its landscapes.

Norma Morgan first learned printmaking at William Stanley Hayter's Atelier 17, an influential workshop. Hayter encouraged technical and stylistic innovation in intaglio printmaking techniques (engraving, etching, and dry point), and many affiliated artists worked in gestural abstraction. Morgan's earliest prints follow this style, although she quickly shifted to figures and landscapes. Morgan learned engraving from watching other artists and then working independently, as Atelier 17 "was not a formal classroom but a workshop."³



Norma Morgan
Vixen Tor, ca. 1992
Watercolor on paper
11 x 14 5/8 inches
Donnell and Dorothea Walker Collection of African American Art

³ Norma Morgan as quoted by Elton C. Fax in *Sixteen Black Artists* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1971), 259.



Norma Morgan
Hyad's Bath & Shelving Rock-Kaaterskill Clove, 1994
 Watercolor on paper
 10 ¼ x 13 ⅝ inches
 Donnell and Dorothea Walker Collection of African American Art

Morgan traveled to England and Scotland from 1951 to 1953 and again from 1961 to 1966. The raw beauty of the countryside with its moorlands, cliffs, and distinctive rock formations inspired Morgan throughout her career. Back in New York, Norma Morgan's proficiency as a printmaker grew, and she made three prints with the publisher Associated American Artists. She also worked with the talented Robert Blackburn at his Printmaking Workshop, a dynamic collaborative center that welcomed a wide range of artists, particularly artists of color. Blackburn studied in Europe at around the same time as Morgan, and both artists received travel grants from the John Hay Whitney Foundation.



Robert Blackburn (American, 1920–2003)
Sunday Afternoon, 2000
 Etching on celadon cotton paper with pulp
 stenciled etching
 17 ¾ x 14 ¾ inches
 Gift of Anthony and Elizabeth Enders, 2015.10.13

Morgan worked episodically in the Catskills for many years, staying in Woodstock, New York, the center of an artists' colony surrounded by forests and waterfalls. In the mid-19th century the natural beauty of this area had attracted the Hudson River School artists, and this legacy appealed to Morgan, who portrayed sites such as Kaaterskill Creek and Falls in her distinctive style.



Jasper Francis Cropsey
(American, 1823–1900)
Rocks at West Lulworth, 1857
Graphite and chalk on paper
11 3/4 x 18 1/4 inches
Gift of Mr. & Mrs. G.H. Macauley, 1948.12

Melding observation with imagination, Morgan created dynamic and resonant works of art with a unique vision. For her, subject matter and technique were often connected. She saw etching and engraving as “almost a form of erosion—you’re wearing away the surface, like weather wears away the surface of structures or anything outside exposed by it. I try to get that quality in the work.”⁴ Morgan’s interest in studying and documenting geology had strong antecedents in the 19th century. The Hudson River School artist Jasper Cropsey studied geology, rendering rocks along the shore in West Lulworth, England. Morgan’s interest in geology was combined with a fascination with the sky and “elemental forces in nature,” such as storms and turbulent atmosphere. Morgan incorporated into her work the Romantic concept of the sublime, the sensation of awe mixed with fear at the power of nature, a theme prevalent among 19th century British and American artists including J. M. W. Turner, John Martin, and Thomas Cole.

⁴ Kerry Davis, “Interview with Ms. Norma Morgan – Engraver, Painter, Printmaker,” 4.

The 1950s and '60s brought Morgan success, as her work was included in important exhibitions and was acquired by such museums as the Museum of Modern Art and the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Morgan’s work was shown in several international exhibitions, aligning her with other expatriate African American artists. In 1964, she was part of the exhibition *10 American Negro Artists Living and Working in Europe*, held in Copenhagen, Denmark, along with Clifford Jackson, Herbert Gentry, and Harvey Cropper, who had left America for Scandinavia, discouraged by racial inequity and the lack of artistic opportunities. This was undoubtedly part of what drove Morgan to travel and work abroad, combined with her keen interest in British art, literature, and landscape.



Herbert Gentry (American, 1919-2003)
Untitled, 1964
Oil on canvas
40 x 30 inches
Donnell and Dorothea Walker Collection
of African American Art
Image courtesy of the Estate of Herbert Gentry



In 1966, Norma Morgan was included in the exhibition *Ten Black Artists* as part of the First World Festival of Negro Art, held in Dakar, Senegal. An international celebration of Pan-African culture, the festival was ground-breaking and influential, bringing together African American artists, musicians, and cultural leaders alongside figures from Africa and the diaspora. There Morgan exhibited *David in the Wilderness* (left) alongside work by the sculptor Richard Howard Hunt, (right), Barbara Chase, Jacob Lawrence, and others. In New York City, Morgan exhibited her work at several galleries, including the Cinque gallery, established by prominent artists Romare Bearden, Norman Lewis, and Ernest Crichow.

Norma Morgan
David in the Wilderness, 1955-56
Engraving and aquatint on paper
34 5/8 x 17 5/8 inches
Donnell and Dorothea Walker Collection of African American Art



Richard Howard Hunt (American, 1935 - 2023)
Untitled, 1980
Color lithograph on paper
30 x 22 inches
Gift of Kerry and C. Betty Davis, 2022

While Norma Morgan continued to produce new work in New York City and the Catskills into the early 2000s, she fell into relative obscurity in her later years. Renewed interest in Morgan's work and career has generated recent retrospective exhibitions at the Academy Art Museum in Maryland (2021) and the Woodstock Artists Association & Museum (2023). The Lyman Allyn is grateful to these institutions and to the scholars and collectors who have shared and celebrated the work of Norma Morgan.



Norma Morgan
Stone Islet with Trees, 1966
Watercolor on paper
10 x 13 ½ inches
The Michael K. and Marian E. Butler Collection



Norma Morgan
My Ancestor, 1992
Watercolor on paper
15 x 10 1/2 inches
Gift of Kerry and C. Betty Davis, 2022



Norma Morgan
Moor Lodge, 1955
Engraving and aquatint on paper
7 3/4 x 12 3/4 inches
The Michael K. and Marian E. Butler Collection