

In the Footsteps of his Ancestors

Written by Editor

Tuesday, 03 June 2014 11:07



The York W. Bailey Museum at the historic Penn Center on St. Helena Island presents, "In the Footsteps of My Ancestors," a beautiful and soul-stirring original art collection created by watercolorist and painter William Kwamena-Poh.

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William Kwamena-Poh is a native of Ghana, West Africa, who came to the United States in the early 1980's and lived in Alabama, Washington D.C., Chicago, and has lived in Savannah, GA since 1995. He is an incredibly gifted self-taught artist who paints beautiful, vibrant and skillful works of art. "When looking upon William's work, you notice immediately that he is greatly influenced by his Ghanaian culture and the love of his people and homeland," states Victoria Smalls, Director of History, Art and Culture at Penn Center. Smalls says, "Cultural traditions look to the past for authenticity as cultural traits are handed down generation to generation. The Ghanaian, West African and Gullah Geechee cultures are one in the same and that fact is so evident in William's work. This artist expresses his culture and has manifested it in many forms, perhaps in the cloth—a woman adorns on her body or as a headdress, in work—as a fisherman sews his cast net to catch fish for his family, in a name—on the side of the bateau a man builds to cross the water or in the sweetness expressed on a child's beautiful brown face. William Kwamena-Poh does this wonderfully—well and as if you are viewing a beautiful photograph or postcard from Ghana."

William is not your typical self-taught artist; he works daily at his studio gallery in Savannah's City Market, devoting hours at a time to his craft; this is evident in the way he speaks about his creative process, the way he has educated himself about the art form and the materials chosen

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to help bring his vision to light. William paints with gouache, also known as opaque watercolor. The density and opacity of gouache permits him to capture and give the observer a glimpse into his beautiful and wonder-filled homeland. William states that "The sun's strength is ever present, providing a colorful environment which is strongly reflected in Ghana culture and clothing." On his visits back home to Ghana he takes several photographs of the places he grew up and then creates free-hand sketches onto tracing paper so that he can depict the natural and original feel of the scenes. William then transfers the drawing onto heavier watercolor paper, manipulating the colors to achieve the beautiful textures and emotional qualities of the scene.

Known internationally for his series images of women, fishermen, children and market scenes, William's work has been featured in numerous museums and galleries. His work is collected by private and well-known public figures in the U.S. and abroad (i.e., Academy Award Winning Actor and Director, Forrest Whitaker and Actress, Angela Bassett). Corporate collections include: Prudential, DuSable Museum, Disney Corp., Amoco Corp., Ford Motors and Black Entertainment Television (BET). Some of his 2013 awards include: Best of Show, Mt. Dora Arts Show, Mt. Dora, FL., Best of 2D Sunfest, West Palm Beach, FL., Award of Distinction, Mainsail Art Festival, St. Petersburg, FL., 1st Place Watercolor, Space Coast Art Festival, Cocoa Beach, FL., and 3rd Place Watercolor, Coconut Grove Arts Festival, Coconut Grove, FL. His award winning works have graced the sets of TV's "The Cosby Show," "Moesha," "Living Single," "Motown 30," "South Central," and the motion picture, "Losing Isaiah."

William's father, who was a great influence on him, was a professor of history in Mamfe, Ghana who came to the United States as a Fulbright Scholar and taught at Talladega College. William's father was aware of his artistic talent; however, wanted William to follow in his footsteps in sharing the history of his people, a wish and desire William did not possess. In time, divine intervention saw both a father's wish and a son's protest through an altered lens. William's art is a gift and he shares the history and culture of his homeland and people with his paint brush. This past February, William returned home to Ghana for the ceremonial celebration of his father's life and burial. It was a spiritually uplifting homecoming. William celebrated both his birthday and the life of his father, the man who had the great foresight to relocate him from Ghana and bring him to the United States for the opportunity to embrace, cultivate and share his gift of art with the masses.

"In the Footsteps of My Ancestors" will be on exhibit at the York W. Bailey Museum through June 21. The York W. Bailey Museum is located in the 50-acre Penn Center National Historic Landmark District at 16 Penn Center Circle West, St. Helena Island. For more information on the York W. Bailey Museum and "In the Footsteps of My Ancestors" exhibit, contact Penn Center (843) 838-2432 / 838-2474 or info@penncenter.com.