

| “Color is the skin of the world”

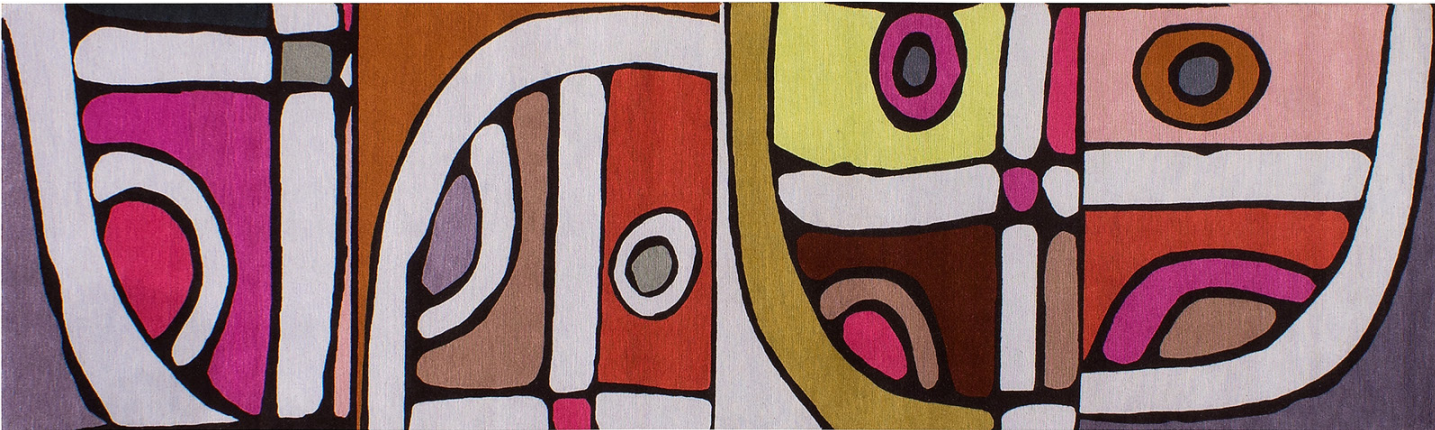
Robert Earl Paige

In the artwork and designed fabrics of Robert Earl Paige, color has a joyful and inclusive power. The Berlin-Kay theory of basic color proposed that color is a universal concept “rooted in our biology”.¹ If color has the potential to unify our experience, then the artist/designer paints a path to a new world order in *The United Colors of Robert Earl Paige*. The exhibition is the first to survey six decades of art practice and pedagogy by the remarkable Black artist, designer, educator and entrepreneur. Featuring the Chicago native’s popular fabrics and furnishings, the exhibition also introduces historical and stylistic context with his improvisational drawings, assemblages, and ceramics made between 1964 and 2024. Regardless of the medium, this artist challenges the traditional distinctions between art, craft, and design, and offers the Black community a spirited aesthetic that instills cultural pride. Through his dynamic work, Paige experiments with the potential of color, pattern, and play to create space for liberation from the world’s ugliness of racial violence and ignorance by conveying goodness through beauty.

Robert Paige’s art practice comes out of many traditions guided by the pursuit of beauty. Ancient Greek philosopher Plato reasoned that together the values of truth, goodness, and beauty are the foundation for a robust society. Similarly, Paige thinks beauty is not just a pleasing optical quality, but rather a way of life. “You should not have anything in your home that is not beautiful or useful,” he proclaims.² Concepts from global cultural traditions inform his definition of beauty. The Japanese idea of wabi-sabi emphasizes the spiritual power of imperfect, unconventional, impermanent forms made from humble and natural materials. Several of the painted textiles in the exhibition reveal their ephemerality through the holes in the fabric that resulted from years of the artist wearing them as scarves. The wabi-sabi belief that “beauty can be coaxed out of ugliness”³ is an aphorism or positive saying, with a double meaning for Paige. Not only does he transform everyday material into art objects, he dreams of reversing the ugliness of racial injustice, violence, and exclusion by designing brilliant domestic furnishings that generate a space of belonging for Black people. Aphorisms form a large body of text art on cardboard in Paige’s oeuvre (sometimes called “Paigisms”). The phrase “artists against ugliness”, which appears throughout Paige’s notes and collages, exists as a caricature of a grimacing bearded man in his artwork too, and points out the artist’s deep sense of social and political responsibility towards improving his community.

The African tradition in decorative arts adds a layer of cultural heritage to the concept of beauty for Paige. Having traveled to Africa, he took inspiration from the distinct patterns and craftsmanship of the woven baskets and clay vases as well as the colorful earthen houses of the Ndebele people. The large scale wall treatments in the exhibition, designed by muralist Dorian Sylvain, reference the Ndebele style using patterns from Paige’s textiles. The African belief of animism, which states that all things have a soul, combined with the importance of maintaining an ancestral connection resonate with the artist. These belief systems are represented through Paige’s abstractions of geometric forms based on Adinkra symbols (a four petal flower, concentric circles, tiled squares, etc.) and the continuous strips of pattern definitive of the regal Kente cloth. Adinkra are visual storytelling devices that the Akan people use to pass down proverbs through generations.⁴ The painting on silk titled *In Reverence to Ancestors* (1997) contains several symbols inspired by Adinkra, including the ladder or Owuo Atwedee, which signifies the universality of death. Paige pays homage to family and friends who have gone before him with the use of these forms throughout his work.

Robert Paige’s work also relates to several distinct Chicago traditions established during the mid-twentieth century including the Chicago Five, New Bauhaus, and the Black Arts Movement. The ambitious textile design production of the Chicago Five (five artist-run design firms) achieved an international reputation for the local textile industry between the 1940s and the 1990s.⁵ From designers like Ben Rose and Angelo Testa, Paige observed the ability for artists to create their own designed fabric for mass production in Chicago. Additionally, these makers solidified the interdependent relationship between the applied arts and architecture through their connections to the New Bauhaus School of Design founded on the South Side. Paige adheres to the Bauhaus paradigm that there is no distinction between artist and craftsman. He commonly refers to his fabrics and objects as



Color Harmony, 2019, Tibetan rug, hand knotted wool and silk, 36 x 120 inches, Courtesy of Oscar Isberian Rugs

Gesamtkunstwerk, a Bauhaus term for a total work of art that combines multiple art forms into one. Formal elements in Paige’s work are direct references to modernist painters connected to Bauhaus including Anni Albers, Sonia Delaunay, Wassily Kandinsky, and Laszlo Moholy-Nagy. Paige’s design of three undulating vertical lines flanked by a circlet, titled “Sonia”, is inspired by the work of Delaunay and is repeated in various media to emphasize his affinity for her style of colorful circular abstractions.

The Black Arts Movement, including creative groups AfriCOBRA (African Commune of Bad Relevant Artists) and the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM), solidified Chicago as a cornerstone of Black Power cultural initiatives during the 1960s and 70s. Paige’s conversations with James Baldwin, Dr. Margaret Burroughs, Wadsworth Jarrell, Amiri Baraka, Sun Ra, Steve McCall and many other significant figures on the South Side inspired him to be interdisciplinary. The exhibition debuts a multimedia wall installation, titled *Critical Race Truth* (1980s-ongoing), that Paige began in response to the original Wall of Respect (1967-1972), which was a mural in Bronzeville painted by artists from the Chicago Organization for Black American Culture (OBACI) celebrating dozens of Black heroes. Paige’s *Critical Race Truth* combines his paintings of a lynched Black man, with found items, nooses, drawings, quotes, and news clippings. This sensitive work raises serious questions about the persistence of racial violence and division in America, especially over the past fifty years. Although Paige strongly supported the Black power movement in the 70s, his belief in community participation to generate Black art and culture put him on a parallel path from the other groups. During this time, Paige and esteemed educator Dr. Carol Adams, founded EVERYDAY ART, an organization that sought to put art making workshops in ordinary places (like laundromats). They hosted the first Black arts festival at South Shore Cultural Center in 1976, which is presented in the exhibition through a homemade film from the artist’s archive. In Paige’s words, “EVERYDAY ART is designed to demonstrate the role of the arts in the revitalization of a rapidly changing community and to involve all residents –artist and non-artist alike– in the creation of a community aesthetic.”⁶

Principles of design anchor Paige’s artistic style. From these standard guidelines, he prioritizes visual elements that create an energizing tension between movement and balance. Line, shape, texture, rhythm, and color order the compositions and define his graphic approach. He began his career as a textile designer and achieved commercial success for making patterns for department stores in the 1960s and 70s. He focused on African-inspired geometric and floral abstractions with the intention to “bring freedom of choice to the marketplace.” The exhibition features the Dakkabar Collection portfolio with sample color fabrics for the acclaimed line of products. This endeavor produced beautiful goods for the Black home as he always intended, allowing him to stay true to his ideals of providing an accessible Black aesthetic. At the same time, Paige was making drawings, fabric paintings, and prints independent of the commercial projects. Two iconic designs featured in the exhibition, *Power to the People* (1966) and *One of a Kind* (1966), stand out as perfect examples of how he employs simple repeating lines, circles, and half circles to make a cohesive graphic

that translates an empowering message of Black unity and authenticity respectively. These loosely hand-drawn motifs reappear throughout Paige’s career in a variety of media and sizes and serve as a mantra for the artist, illustrating the desire for Black solidarity and nonhierarchical power structures.

Cross-generational learning based on the fluid relationships between art, design, craft, and community form the core of Robert Paige’s intuitive method of teaching. Both Hyde Park Art Center (through Open Arts, the pay-what-you-can structure for art classes) and Paige are proponents of free and open access to art making for all ages. The exhibition includes a room for art sessions and talks inside the gallery called *The Woodshed*, borrowed from the title of a book by the abstract painter, Jack Whitten. During the run of the exhibition, Hyde Park Art Center pilots a community engagement series of “pop-in” sessions for free hands-on workshops in the gallery once a week at satellite locations once a month. These classes explore Paige’s teaching principles as a model for exploratory learning that highlight problem solving skills and ignite curiosity.

Hyde Park Art Center is proud to bring much needed attention to the longstanding art practice and pedagogy of Robert Earl Paige. The exhibition culminates nearly four years of developing a relationship between Paige and the Art Center’s artist community. Some of these artists are featured in a concurrent exhibition *Paraplui* in Gallery 2. The Art Center incubated Paige’s art practice through a fifteen month Radicle Residency as part of the Jackman Goldwasser Residency Program during which he was reunited with ceramic classes and made several new clay works for this show. Over one hundred artworks and artifacts are featured in the exhibition along with new and recent rugs, woven textile, and custom furniture Paige made in collaboration with Oscar Isberian Rugs, The Weaving Mill/ Emily Winter, and Hyde Park Art Center/Jeffrey Robinson respectively. *The United Colors of Robert Earl Paige* introduces (or re-introduces) the colorful artwork and teachings of the artist to the local and global community and confirms his legacy in the field of art and design. Like Paige always says, “if you sit at the table long enough, they’re going to have to bring you the chips.”

Allison Peters Quinn

Curator of *The United Colors of Robert Earl Paige*



ROBERT EARL PAIGE (b.1936) is an interdisciplinary artist, designer, educator and entrepreneur living and working in Chicago. He earned a diploma from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (1962) while employed as an interior

designer for the architecture firm Skidmore, Owings, & Merrill (1950-1964) before transitioning to focus on textiles. He has partnered with major enterprises such as the Italian fashion house Fiorio (1964) to make silk scarves, and department stores Sears, Roebuck and Co.(1967) and Walmart (2003) to create home decor, and home/fashion fabrics respectively. His signature line the Dakkabar Collection was sold nationwide in over 100 Sears stores and included several home furnishing pieces inspired by West African imagery with a popular palette in the 1970s.

As part of the community of artists, poets, and musicians in Chicago’s Black Arts Movement, Paige maintains its ideology of community

participation in art and culture. He co-founded EVERYDAY ART, which was an organization that included the Black community in creating a neighborhood aesthetic and hosted the first Black art and music festival at the South Shore Cultural Center (1976). Paige’s business ventures include shared studio spaces, workshops, and One of a Kind (1980), a gallery and studio on 71st Street dedicated to photography, sculpture, and accessories by Black makers. The artist strongly believes that everyone is an artist and often develops platforms to sell their work.

Paige taught art and design principles to youth in the 1990s and 2000s through the City of Chicago’s Gallery 37 and After School Matters

program and is a frequent lecturer with the nomadic Black Arts Movement School Modality. Paige has been an artist-in-residence for many organizations, including the Cabrini Green Neighborhood Alliance, DuSable Museum of African American History, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture (New York), Ndebele Foundation (South Africa) and Hyde Park Art Center. His fabric works have been exhibited in New York at The Museum of Contemporary Craft (now Museum of Art & Design), Salon94 Design, and the Cooper Hewitt Smithsonian Design Museum, and in Chicago at the Chicago Cultural Center, DuSable Museum of African American History, and SMART Museum of Art.

¹Kassia St. Clair, *The Secret Lives of Color*. (New York: Penguin, 2017), 35. ²Press release for Fahara Collection at Wal-Mart, 2002. ³Leonard Koren, *Wabi-Sabi for Artists, Designers, Poets & Philosophers*. (California: Imperfect Publishing, 1998), 52. ⁴<https://thediasporacollective.com/blogs/discover/andikra-symbols-tell-a-story> ⁵Christa C Mayer Thurman, *Museum Studies* Vol 23, No.1, *Rooted in Chicago: Fifty Years of Textile Design Traditions*, (Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago,1997) ⁶Everyday Art promotional flyer in Robert Paige’s archives, 1975.



Sonia, 2001, hand-painted and dyed (gum resist) on Crepe de Chine silk, 62 x 46 inches



Chess Records, 1967, hand-painted and dyed (gum resist) on Crepe de Chine silk, 23 x 32 inches



In Reverence to Ancestors, 1997, hand-painted and dyed silk on Crepe de Chine silk, 20 x 20 inches



Power to the People Series, 2022, hand-painted stoneware, Glazed stoneware, 11 x 19 inches

Public Programs

Exhibition Reception
Saturday, April 6, 1-4PM

Exhibition Tour
Tuesday, April 9, 6-8PM

***The People's Ring Shout* by Honey Pot Performance**
Saturday, May 4, 1-2:30PM

A Landmark of Work: A Panel Discussion on African Americans in Decorative Arts
Thursday, July 11, 6-8PM

Join us for a conversation moderated by writer, educator, and Radicle Curatorial Resident, Rikki Byrd, with artists, Robert Paige and Norman Teague, and Art Conservator and Researcher, Lamar Gayles.

The Existence of Black Art: A Panel Discussion
Saturday, August 17, 1-3PM

This discussion, moderated by art historian and Art Center Board member, Romi Crawford, includes artist Bernard Williams, curator, Antawan I. Byrd, and archivist, Skyla S. Hearn.

Gallery Concert in collaboration with Hyde Park Jazz Festival
Saturday, September 28

Notes From the Woodshed: Free Art Making Workshops and Conversations
Brown Bag Sessions in Gallery 1
Every other Wednesday in June, July, August, and September, 11AM - 2PM

Topics include:
June 12: *The history and meaning of Adinkra symbols in contemporary art*
June 26: *The history & legacy of AfriCOBRA*
July 10: *Kool-Aid colors: Color theory in Black art*
July 24: *A Living Archive: How to archive & preserve your work now*
August 7: *Materiality & Technique: How do materials shape the process?*
August 21: *Adornment: The influence of style on art*
September 4: *Everyday Art, Everyday Materials: The history of EVERYDAY ART now and then*

Everybody's Art
April-October

Free art making workshops hosted by community partners out in South Side neighborhoods from April through October, 2024.

Visit our website to learn more about these and additional upcoming events.



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The United Colors of Robert Earl Paige is part of Art Design Chicago, a citywide collaboration initiated by the Terra Foundation for American Art that highlights the city's artistic heritage and creative communities. The research and development, catalog, community engagement program and exhibition was funded by the Terra Foundation for American Art. Generous support for the public program and catalog was provided by the Exhibition Committee co-chaired by Ghian and Traci Foreman, Janis Kanter and Tom McCormick with contributions from Michele Boone, Anna Kunz, Patric McCoy, Lauren Moltz and John Clement, and John and Roxana Oxtoby.

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Cover Image: Universal Colours of Paige, 1990, Hand-painted and dyed (batik) on Crepe de Chine silk, 40½ x 44½ inches

Portrait of Robert Earl Paige courtesy of Tony Smith
Photography by Tom Van Eynde

Hyde ParkARTCENTER

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The United Colors of Robert Earl Paige

April 6–October 27, 2024

Gallery 1 & Cleve Carney Gallery