

## INNOVATORS

By Ervin Dyer

### Vivian Ann Davidson Hewitt, Collector Of African American Art

Ninety winters ago, Vivian Ann Davidson Hewitt was born amid the coalfields of New Castle, Pennsylvania. In her family home hung a prized oil-on-canvas painting of a cow pasture that nurtured her love of art. That passion would one day take the petite Dr. Hewitt all the way to the White House.

In between, Hewitt became the first African American to work in Pittsburgh's public library system, and with her husband, John, amassed one of the largest and most significant collections of artwork by blacks.

Their collection consists of works by renowned artists—many with Pittsburgh ties—such as Romare Bearden, regarded as one of the greatest American artists of his generation (and a friend of the couple); Henry Ossawa Tanner, one of the first African American artists to achieve acclaim in America and Europe; and Carnegie Mellon graduate Ann Tanksley.

Vivian Hewitt, who now lives in New York City, recalls growing up in New Castle, at the time bustling with factories producing bronze, aluminum, and pottery. The fourth of five children, her mother was a former teacher who stayed home to raise her family and her father was a butler for the lieutenant governor of Pennsylvania. When wealthy white families had to shed staff during the Depression, he found employment as a skilled worker for the mill. Their close-knit community numbered about 5,000 black Americans.

Hewitt was active in Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church and went to integrated schools, where she excelled in art, music, history, and English. She graduated high school in 1937 with 11 other black students, the school's largest number of black graduates at that time. She majored in French at Geneva

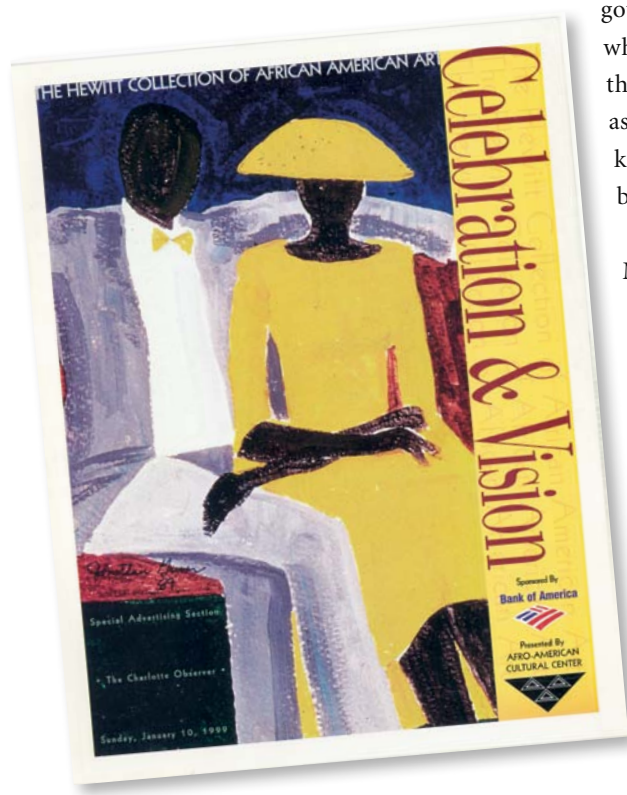
College (where she later received an honorary doctorate), before pursuing a second degree in 1943 at the Carnegie Library School, a program that later became part of the University of Pittsburgh. She was only the second African American admitted to the library school.

Later that year, Hewitt began working part time at the Wylie Avenue branch of the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh. As the first black to do so, she recalls that the library director told her, "We're sorry you don't look more like a Negro than you do so people would know exactly what you are."

Despite the discrimination, in 1944, she began working full time with the library for \$25 a week. The notoriety led the *Pittsburgh Courier* to take her picture but it was a difficult path. "I felt like I was on showcase 24 hours a day. I had to walk the chalk line. I remember I sat in a protest at Isaly's and I couldn't let the library know. I couldn't be an embarrassment to them or I might be censured or fired. It was difficult to fight local injustice."

In 1947, Hewitt moved to the library's Homewood branch. Two years later, she was about to transfer to East Liberty when she was offered a position she couldn't refuse in Atlanta. It was there that she met John Hewitt, an English teacher (later a medical writer), and they soon married.

The Hewitts were newlyweds when they bought their first piece of art, a Picasso reproduction. They acquired their first



Program cover featuring *Easter* by Jonathan Greene. The original is in the Hewitt collection at the Harvey R. Gantt Center for African-American Arts + Culture, Charlotte, N.C.

HHC L&A, MSS 460, Box 1, Folder 3.

original painting in 1960, while on vacation in Haiti, and added to it one painting at a time, commemorating special occasions in their lives with art. Despite their financial limitations, they not only collected art but became close friends with many of the artists.

The couple was married for 50 years. John passed in 2000 but Vivian Hewitt remains in the Upper West Side brownstone

they purchased in 1964. For years they lived across from pioneering African American judge and civil rights advocate Constance Baker Motley, who became a close friend. The couple also knew poet Langston Hughes, and many of the greats of the *Pittsburgh Courier* newspaper became their



**Above: Vivian Davidson Hewitt, 1946.**

Heinz Family Fund, Charles "Teenie" Harris Collection, Carnegie Museum of Art.

**Left: Dr. Vivian Hewitt with students from Fifth Avenue High School, 1944.**

Photo by Ted Moss.

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# UP FRONT

friends, such as Chester Washington, Hazel Garland, and Evelyn Cunningham: “She was something else,” recalls Hewitt. “Genuinely lovely. She taught my husband to swim.” By the 1970s they were opening their home to showcase the work of Ernest Crichlow, Alvin Hollingsworth, Hale Woodruff, and J. Eugene Grigsby, a cousin of Dr. Hewitt’s.

Every wall of Hewitt’s home remains covered with art. Two etchings by Henry Tanner hang above a desk. In 1996, she visited

the White House, by invitation from President Clinton, when Tanner’s *Sand Dunes at Sunset*, *Atlantic City* was hung there. Other notables in the Hewitt collection include Elizabeth Catlett, Jonathan Green, Jacob Lawrence, and Hale Woodruff.

“John and I never sought publicity,” says Hewitt. “We loved art and wanted to invest in our heritage. We loved collecting. We first went to Haiti in the 1960s. Art was cheap and we could afford it. That’s how we began.”

In 1998, Bank of America acquired 58 of the Hewitts’ pieces for the Harvey B. Gantt Center for African-American Arts + Culture in Charlotte, North Carolina. It is a cornerstone of the center’s permanent collection, and has also toured the country during the past decade. It’s a testament to the Hewitts’ passion and foresight to collect black artwork long before most others thought to do so. 

**Ervin Dyer** is a North Side resident who writes about African American history in Western Pennsylvania and beyond.

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