

GIFTS OF ART

Serendipity Brings First Robert Freeman Painting to the MFA

Museum Patron and longtime MFA supporter, Newell Flather served in the Peace Corps in Ghana in 1961. During his time there, Flather befriended Robert Freeman and family—Freeman’s father worked for then president, Kwame Nkrumah—and spent time with them in the historic coastal town of Winneba, where Flather taught at the local high school.

Years later in 1981, Newell and Kate Flather were living in Newton, their children Newell and Alice enrolled at Noble and Greenough School. Young Newell repeatedly expressed excitement about the school’s artist-in-residence, encouraging his parents to see the work of Robert Freeman. On a fateful Parents’ Night, Newell Sr. realized this was the very same Freeman he’d known in Ghana so many years earlier. That night Flather approached the artist and asked jokingly, “How are things in Winneba Beach?”

The Flathers first saw Freeman’s work during an exhibition at the Chapel Gallery in Newton in 1982. They were especially struck by the power and presence of *Black Tie* (right), which was the first work Freeman painted while in residence at Noble and Greenough School. They purchased the painting and hung it in a place of honor in their living room—remodeled specifically to showcase the work—for 28 years, until they generously donated it to the MFA.

The painting is the first Freeman work to enter the Museum’s collection and is especially meaningful given the artist’s involvement as an MFA Overseer and member of the Department of Contemporary Art Visiting Committee. This monumental piece is seen as a defining work in the artist’s career—the beginning of his focus on representing what W. E. B. Du Bois called the “talented tenth,” or the black middle class. At the painting’s center is a table of African Americans dressed in formal attire staring out at the viewer, creating a feeling that is both awkward and welcoming. Viewers wonder, are we unwanted, or simply late in arriving?

When reflecting on this gift, Newell Flather said: “This painting has been a central part of my family’s life; we’ve felt enormous pride and pleasure in owning it. Now we feel a sense of gratification knowing that others will have the opportunity to enjoy and ponder this spectacular work.”



Robert T. Freeman, *Black Tie*, 1981. Oil on canvas.

Gift of Kate and Newell Flather, Alice Flather, and Newell Flather II. Reproduced with permission.



Newell Flather, Robert Freeman, and Kate Flather.

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