

Profiles of *African Americans* in Tennessee



GREGORY D. RIDLEY, JR. (1925-2004)

“From the Hands of a Master” was the title of Greg Ridley’s survey exhibition (1951—2003) mounted in the summer of 2003 to honor the master artist in the Nashville Public Library Art Gallery. Five years earlier, Ridley had been commissioned to create public art for the library’s Grand Reading Room. The commission resulted in “A Story of Nashville,” eighty hammered-copper panels in bas relief or repoussé, installed to form a continuous, room-sized horizontal frieze above the book stacks. When the library opened in 2001, Ridley’s series of signature panels interpreting the history of Nashville was the focal point of public acclaim. Thus, when the exhibition of selected creations during Ridley’s long career was displayed at the library gallery in 2003, the master artist had come full circle from his student-mentor days begun in 1945 at Fisk University under the tutelage of painter and muralist Aaron Douglas (1899—1979) to fulfill and surpass the creative promise seen by his mentor and friend over thirty-four years.

The journey had been a long and laborious one for Gregory David Leon Ridley, Jr. Born July 18, 1925, in Smyrna, Rutherford County, Tennessee, he was the son of Gregory D. L. Ridley, Sr., a minister, and Lucile Elder Ridley, a domestic worker and crafts artist. His mother was his first influence in visual art, as young Greg Ridley accompanied her to club exhibits, where she displayed her crafts, quilts, and appliqués, and to various showings of Appalachian art and crafts. In 1936, the Ridley family moved to Nashville, Davidson County, and Greg was educated in local public schools, being graduated in 1944 from Pearl High School. He served a year as Apprentice Seaman in the U. S. Navy during World War Two and, after being honorably discharged, entered Fisk University in Nashville in 1945 and was graduated in 1949. The four years spent studying with Fisk’s professor of art Aaron Douglas, one of

the most prominent artists of the 1916-1940 Harlem Renaissance, set Ridley’s feet on the artistic path he would pursue and refine over the following fifty-four years.

In 1951, Ridley earned an undergraduate degree in art education from Tennessee State University, Nashville, and in 1955, after studying with Ulfert Wilke, Justus Bier, Walter Creese, and Creighton Gilbert, earned a master’s degree in fine arts from the University of Louisville—the first person to receive this degree from Kentucky’s U. of L. His first academic position, 1951-1958, was as instructor of art at Alabama State University. Following tenures included concurrent appointments as assistant professor of art at Grambling State University and Elizabeth City State College, 1958-1962, followed by professor of art at Tennessee State University and visiting lecturer and sculptor at Fisk University, 1966-1971. During 1971-1975, he served as studio artist, lecturer, professor of art, and museum coordinator at C.U.N.Y., then returned to Tennessee State University as associate professor and art gallery curator, 1975-1981. The next decade saw his return to Fisk University, where he served as associate professor of art, 1981-1985; art consultant to President Henry Ponder, 1989-1991; and acting curator at Van Vechten Gallery, 1991-1995. After a year as artist-in-residence at Morehouse College, Atlanta, 1995-1996, Ridley retired and returned to Nashville to serve as adjunct associate professor of art at Tennessee State University and professor of art at Fisk University.

Throughout his academic career, Ridley was first and foremost a working artist. Over the years his work, utilizing myriad techniques in painting and sculpture, has appeared in major exhibitions across the nation and is included in numerous collections held by museums, corporations, art galleries, and private citizens.

Among his major commissions was one for Fisk University to memorialize the history of the Carl Van Vechten Gallery of Fine Arts, resulting in Ridley's pair of copper repoussé sculpted panels adorning the entrance doors to the gallery. His "N'gere Mask Series" in oil paintings are displayed in Fisk's library, where also hang six completed copper panels of his "History of Fisk University." Among his local exhibitions were "Visions of My People: African-American Artists in Tennessee" at the Tennessee State Museum, and Ridley's one-man shows have been mounted at Cheekwood Fine Arts Center and the Nashville Artists' Guild Gallery, among numerous other venues. At Tennessee State University his work is part of the permanent collection in the Brown-Daniel Library and the Hiram Van Gordon Art Gallery. Examples of Ridley's work have been included in fourteen visual-art publications, including *American Negro Art*, *Prizewinning Art in America*, and *Two Centuries of Black American Art*.

At the height of his creativity and acclaim, Gregory Ridley died January 10, 2004, at his home. He is survived by one of his two sons, Cecil Kelley Greenidge; daughters, Jeanene Ridley, Clarette Ridley, Ronica Ridley-Martin, Gloria L. Ridley II, and Crystal Brooks Ridley; five grandchildren and four great-grandchildren; numerous kith and kin; and his wife of forty-one years, Gloria Louise Brooks Ridley. To his supportive wife he had dedicated the exhibition, "From the Hands of a Master," mounted June 13 through September 13, 2003, at the Nashville Public Library: "This exhibition is dedicated to my beautiful wife Gloria Louise Brooks Ridley, who has been an inspiration to me and to many other artists, a knowing collector of our art, and a strong nurturer of the creative spirit."

Reavis L. Mitchell, Jr.
