

Christ in the Manger by Francis Musangogwantamu was donated to the Hampton University Museum by The Harmon Foundation in 1967. The Harmon Foundation was an organization based in New York City that supported and promoted the work of African and African American artists. It was established in 1922 by a real estate developer and philanthropist William E. Harmon. Around 1925, the foundation started an awards program for excellent achievements by African Americans in a variety of fields, including the visual arts. Starting in 1928, the foundation arranged traveling exhibitions of art by African Americans, which toured nationwide. During the 1960s, the foundation organized art exhibitions featuring traditional and modern African arts. These shows traveled to various HBCUs, including Hampton University (then called Hampton Institute), to foster interest in Indigenous African cultures among African Americans. The foundation worked to obtain American sponsors for promising African artists and sometimes arranged for some artists to receive further education in the United States. The Harmon Foundation dissolved in 1967, resulting in the donation of their artworks and documents to various institutions, including the Hampton University Museum. Brother Francis Musangogwantamu was born in 1931 in a small village near Kampala, Uganda. His interest in art began as a hobby when he started his studies for the Brothers of Christian Instruction. Margaret Trowell, the founder of the art school at Makerere University, now the Margaret Trowell School of Industrial and Fine Arts located in Kampala, recognized Musangogwantamu's potential as an artist and asked the higher-ups of the Brother of Christian Instruction to send him to Makerere to study. He began his art training at Makerere College in 1954. Musangogwantamu, a devout Christian created art with "Africanized" Christian iconography. While some accepted Musangogwantamu's art, others strongly objected to his depiction of Christianity, seeing it as radical. For example, Musangogwantamu had his designs for a mural in a Catholic Cathedral rejected because he depicted Christ as an African man instead of a white man. In response to the notion that Christ could not be African, Musangogwantamu asked, "I wonder...if Christ is not universal?" In Christ in the Manger, Musangogwantamu depicts a Universal Christ. Christ, who we can assume is sleeping on the lap of his mother, Mary, is the focus of the piece. He positions Christ in the center of the frame with a heavenly light radiating from his body. Musangogwantamu has painted all the people in the manger Black with brightly patterned clothing and renditions of the Gimesi and Kanza, traditional women's and men's clothing in Uganda. According to Musangogwantamu, "If I can succeed to have many poor people buy works of art – no matter even if it is for a shilling, I am sure I will be satisfied just by the fact a message is being passed on through art." This quote, in relation to Christ in the Manger, allows us to understand the importance of Musangogwantamu's depiction of biblical figures as Africans. In doing this, he is practicing self-representation. This piece is meant for black Africans to see themselves in a religion that usually excludes them in its art. The message he is spreading is if we are all made in God's image, there is no reason Christ cannot be depicted as African. Works Cited: Brown, Evelyn S. "Africa's Contemporary Art and Artists: A Review of Creative Activities in Painting, Sculpture, Ceramics and Crafts of More Than 300 Artists Working in the Modern Industrialized Society of Some of the Countries of Sub-Saharan Africa". New York: Harmon Foundation, 1966. Evenhaugen, Anne. "African American art and the Harmon Foundation." Smithsonian Libraries and Archives. February 22, 2013.