

Robert Colescott

“Imagine! Going to Egypt”

11 September - 18 October 2025

Robert Colescott was born in Oakland, California on August 26, 1925. After graduating from the University of California, Berkeley in 1949, Colescott moved to Paris, where he studied under Fernand Léger for a year. He moved back to California and obtained a Master of Arts degree from UC Berkeley in 1951. After teaching and making art in Seattle for a few years, he became an assistant professor at Portland State College from 1957 to 1964.

In 1963 Colescott applied to be an artist in residence at the American Research Center in Cairo for a year, and upon his acceptance he moved with his family - his wife Sally Marie Dennett and their newborn son - to Egypt in 1964. His stay there is understood to have been a transformative experience, one in which Colescott began to embrace his racial identity and incorporate it into his artistic practice. “His time in Egypt alters not only his self-perspective as a Black man but also his view of the history of the art with which he engages. As he will later put it: ‘Two years in Cairo, Egypt, and three thousand years of nonwhite art history later, the pink pneumatic nudes of Europe faded. Then American society hit me like a ton of bricks.’ His ethereal figures of this era are redolent of the imagery on the tombs and statuary he sees in Egypt, and he finds himself embracing race and color as one and the same - that is, in Egypt, this Black man, whose parents passed as white and who himself has sometimes passed as white, finds a history for his and others’ bodies.”¹

Reflecting on his time there, Colescott said he “was influenced by the narrative form of Egyptian art, by 3,000 years of a ‘non-white’ art tradition, and by living in a culture that is strictly ‘non-white.’” He discovered in this ancient culture a way of engaging his present society: “I think that excited me about some other things, some of the ideas about race and culture in our own country; I wanted to say something about it.”²

After a brief return to Portland, Colescott moved back to Egypt in 1966, for what was supposed to be a two-year position at the American University in Cairo. His stay was cut short by the Six-Day War, which forced him and his family to flee in June of 1967. They first went to Italy (Naples and then Rome) before moving to France, where they stayed for two more years, mostly in Paris, where they witnessed the student movement in May 1968.

Colescott moved back to Oakland in 1970, where the climate was likewise charged with political unrest. Nearby Berkeley had become the epicenter of the growing culture of protest, while Oakland itself was the birthplace of the Black Panthers just a few years prior. Michael Lobel writes of the importance of this political backdrop to Colescott’s artistic development: “If Colescott’s time in Egypt and France helped shape his political consciousness and contributed to his racial awareness, his return to America must only have intensified this experience for him. [...] And after his homecoming Colescott’s work began to shift as well, as it moved from painterly concerns such as composition and color to an embrace of narrative and social critique.”³

Colescott remained in Oakland for another 15 years, painting and teaching at various institutions, including Berkeley and the San Francisco Art Institute, before accepting a position as a full-time professor at the University of Arizona in Tucson in 1985, where he was based until his death in 2009.

“Imagine! Going to Egypt” is the first exhibition of Robert Colescott at Galerie Buchholz, and the first solo presentation of the artist’s work in Germany. The exhibition focuses on paintings Colescott made shortly before, during, and just after his first stay in Cairo, from 1963 to 1965. The presentation of these historic works marks the 100th anniversary of Robert Colescott’s birth. For this occasion, we commissioned a new text by American art-historian Michael Lobel.

Galerie Buchholz would like to thank Alex Colescott, Cooper Colescott, and the Robert H. Colescott Trust for their collaboration and support of this exhibition, and Michael Lobel.

A recent retrospective of Colescott's work - *Art and Race Matters: The Career of Robert Colescott* - co-curated by Lowery Stokes Sims and Matthew Weseley, opened at the Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati, in 2019 and traveled to the Portland Art Museum, Portland; Sarasota Art Museum, Sarasota; Chicago Cultural Center, Chicago; and New Museum, New York. Other notable exhibitions include *Valley of the Queens*, Colescott's first solo museum show at Portland Art Museum in 1966; his first major retrospective organized by the San Jose Museum of Art, *Robert Colescott: A Retrospective, 1975-1986*, which traveled to seven venues between 1987 and 1989; his second major retrospective *Recent Paintings, 1987-1997*, which originated at the 47th Venice Biennale, where Colescott was the first African American to represent the United States, and traveled to eight venues between 1997 and 2000; and *Troubled Goods: A Ten Year Survey*, curated by Peter Selz in 2007 for Meridian Gallery, San Francisco.

¹ "Robert Colescott", in: "Sixties Surreal", Whitney Museum, New York City, 2025, p. 193

² Interview with Ann Shengold: "Conversation with Robert Colescott", in: "Robert Colescott: Another Judgement", Charlotte: North Carolina, Knight Gallery, Spirit Square Arts Center, Charlotte, 1985, n.p.

³ Lobel, Michael: "Black to Front: Robert Colescott", in: *Artforum*, October 2004, p. 268