



Many Mansions

by Kerry James Marshall

1994

THE ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO

Department of Museum Education

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ART
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Kerry James Marshall (American, b. 1955)

Many Mansions, 1994

Acrylic on paper mounted on canvas

114 x 135 in.

Max V. Kohnstamm Fund, 1995.147

“So I’m getting off the expressway everyday,” Kerry James Marshall begins, “and I see this sign, ‘Welcome to Wentworth Gardens.’ I look around Chicago and I see that there are three other housing projects called ‘gardens’—Stateway Gardens, Rockwell Gardens, Altgeld Gardens.” The Chicago-based artist continued, “They look like everything else but a garden.... Was there a trend once to name housing projects as garden spots? Isn’t there an irony there?”

Thus began Marshall’s *Garden Project* series, which includes this large riveting work from 1994 called *Many Mansions*. In the series, Marshall examines what public housing means to him—the difference between the misguided utopian ideal and its harsh reality. The painting abounds in strong symbols. Looking almost like cardboard cutouts, stark high-rise towers that represent the immense eight-building development of Stateway Gardens form the paintings backdrop. Their gold color may refer to Chicago’s elite Gold Coast neighborhood, so near and yet so far. Carefully manicured trees lead our eye to the intriguing foreground scene. There, three solemn men weed, rake, and dig a garden that is in striking contrast to the austere buildings behind them. There are also random daisies, what look like lilies, and an Easter basket or two. The men are formally dressed, more suitable for worship or prayer, in jet-black shoes, pants, and ties the color of their skin, with their bright shirts complementing the whites of their eyes.

Marshall never lets the viewer forget that this is a painted depiction—an investigation or examination—not a recreation of reality. Fluttering in front of the weather-worn “Welcome” sign are two bluebirds of happiness that seem to have flown right out of a Walt Disney film; “Bless Our Happy Home” reads the streamer that dangles from their beaks. Above them, the signpost tells us that there are eight buildings here, with 1644 units. “IL 2-22”—the official registration number for Stateway Gardens—is stamped in red letters across the buildings on the right, and in the bright blue sky above the entire scene is a framing red ribbon, like a banner of honor. Its message, “In my mother’s house there are many mansions,” feminizes the Bible’s well-known New Testament phrase from John 14:2 perhaps to express the idea of an all-inclusive home, or perhaps in reference to absent fathers.

With *Many Mansions*, Marshall blends contemporary subjects and materials with traditions of the past. The large unstretched canvas resembles a brilliant, albeit slightly weatherworn, billboard. With its mixture of words, painted patches, decorative curlicues, and banners, the multilayered image combines acrylic paint with **collage**. But the stylized figures, flat space, and lively patterning reflect, in Marshall’s words, the “traditional folkways” of black art. He also draws on art historical sources. In using the word “garden” to title his series, Marshall suggests idealized **pastoral** compositions seen in paintings beginning with the **Italian Renaissance**. Indeed, despite the knowledge that this housing development is a desolate urban site, Marshall depicts an idyllic foreground scene that unfolds with an almost otherworldly grace.

Perhaps the strongest of Marshall's symbols are the carefully depicted, trance-like figures themselves. As Art Institute **curator** Daniel Schulman stated, "The figures are mesmerizing; their eyes—they engage you." Calling these jet-black figures **archetypes**, Marshall cites as his source African American author **Ralph Ellison**'s award-winning 1952 first novel, *Invisible Man*. As the book's powerful opening reads, "I am an invisible man. No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allan Poe; nor am I one of your Hollywood-movie ectoplasms. I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids—I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me."

Marshall elaborates about his figures' dark color: "I painted them to heighten their function as rhetorical figures. That's how we identify ourselves, as black. It's going to the extreme that we accumulate our power. I also wanted to heighten their visual impact as social and political figures." Using biblical allusions to Easter and the resurrection, Marshall depicts fully grown men who refuse to give in to society's degradations and misled attempts at salvation. They will give dignity to their "mansions," digging themselves out on their own.

Marshall's knowledge of housing projects is firsthand, for he grew up in them himself, first in a low-rise project in Birmingham, Alabama. When he was eight, his family moved to the Nickerson Gardens development in the Watts neighborhood of Los Angeles. As a little boy in the 1960s, Marshall seemed eerily positioned to experience the upheaval of the Civil Rights Movement. From his early childhood in Birmingham, he remembers the police dogs and water hoses during the 1963 sit-ins, and two years later, the family was in Los Angeles when the riots in Watts occurred. The Marshalls also lived in Chicago during the police shoot-out of the Black Panther Party in 1969.

But, Marshall insists, life in the projects "wasn't any different than being in a house, except we paid less rent." He has fond memories, such as using the communal garden tools in Birmingham to tend his family's garden. The Los Angeles project, he reminisced, "had a huge gymnasium and a large field where we flew kites." He used to check out toys from the project's toy library, returning them the next day. "These [*Garden Project*] pictures are meant to represent what is complicated about the projects," explains Marshall. "We think of projects as places of utter despair. All we hear of is the incredible poverty, abuse, violence, and misery that exists there, but [there] is also a great deal of hopefulness, joy, pleasure, and fun."

One early episode of joy determined Marshall's life course. It happened when he was five and in kindergarten. As he recalled, "If you behaved yourself in school and were good, the teacher rewarded you by letting you sit down and look at a scrapbook she'd made up of painted postcards and pictures from magazines. One day I was good, so I got to sit down and look at this art and it was so magical. I knew right then what I wanted to do. I wanted to make magical pictures like that. I

wanted to paint." This desire motivated him through high school, city college, and the Otis Art Institute in Los Angeles, where he studied with artist Charles White. Marshall also worked briefly in film as a production designer. His film work may have influenced the stage-like setting of his paintings, as well as their sudden shifts in style, from a cartoon-like **realism** to decorative curlicues to **abstract** drips.

A 1991 grant from the National Endowment for the Arts enabled Marshall to pursue painting full time. In addition to the Art Institute of Chicago, his works are included in collections of the Studio Museum in Harlem, New York; Los Angeles County Museum of Art; and the Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington DC. His paintings have been included in exhibitions at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, (1993); the Berlinische Galerie, Berlin, Germany, (1994); and in 1995's *American Exhibition*, the venerable survey of contemporary art at the Art Institute of Chicago. He also was included in the exhibition *Art in Chicago 1945–1995* held at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago during 1996–1997. In 1997, Marshall represented the United States in *Documenta X*, the international contemporary art exhibition in Kassel, Germany and received the prestigious John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation grant the same year.

Marshall's paintings examine the same issues of "two-ness" that **W.E.B. DuBois** articulated almost a century before. As DuBois declared, "One never feels [the African American's] two-ness—an American, a Negro: two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.... He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of opportunity closed in his face." Marshall reiterates this "two-ness" in his underlying theme, "the ambivalence and duality that black Americans experience with that hyphenated designation of Black-American and African-American—the ambivalence that black people experience about really joining and participating in American culture fully. There's still—in the back of people's minds—this notion that they're never really ever going to be fully American." It is just this "ambivalence and duality" that has informed Marshall's art with richness and complexity of vision.

Glossary

abstract art: A term referring to art that does not attempt to depict recognizable scenes or objects, but instead uses color, form, texture, etc. for expressive purposes

archetypes: The original model or prototype; a typical and perfect example

collage: Derived from the French verb *coller*, to gum, that describes works of art made by sticking pieces of paper, material, or other items onto a flat backing, often in combination with painted passages. First used extensively by artists in the early 20th century, collage extended the boundaries of art by combining painted surfaces with other materials.

curator: Person responsible for the care, presentation, study, and interpretation of works of art, usually in a museum context

DuBois, W.E.B.: Harvard-educated author, educator, and civil rights advocate who sought full civil, political, and economic rights for African Americans. Cofounder in 1910 of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (N.A.A.C.P.) and editor of its magazine *Crisis* (1910–1934). His collection of essays entitled *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) is his best-known work.

Ellison, Ralph: American writer whose award-winning novel *Invisible Man* (1952) captures the pain of a nameless young black man trying to find his place in a hostile society

pastoral: A landscape painting that represents the countryside as a paradise filled with demi-gods, nymphs and satyrs, shepherds and shepherdesses, and romantic love

realism: General term describing an intent to depict the appearance of the world. When capitalized, refers to a movement in 19th-century France that concentrated on the unidealized representation of existing things

Italian Renaissance: From the French word meaning “rebirth.” A revival of learning, literature, art, and architecture that initially emphasized the classical models of Greek and Roman antiquity. Began in Italy in the late 13th century, then spread to other parts of Europe; lasted throughout the 16th century.

Classroom Activities and Discussion Questions

- Artists have devised a variety of techniques to make a flat surface look three-dimensional. Place tracing paper over the poster and trace the main figures and shapes. Have students cut them out then locate where the artist used overlapping images or objects that get smaller as they move back in space. Using the cutout figures, have students move them about. Students will find that an object that overlaps another object will always look closer. They will also find that objects placed in the foreground will look closer than those in the middle and background. Have students create their own picture based on size diminution and overlapping.
- Make a list of objects in the painting that represent family and a list of objects that refer to community. Where do these things overlap? Discuss how your community shapes your family traditions and celebrations.
- Ask students what they know about housing projects or life in the inner city. Is it from their own experience? Where or from whom have they learned this information? How does this painting support or challenge what they think or know to be true about places like Stateway Gardens?
- In this painting, these men are part of a community who live in a housing project. How are the three men in the picture contributing to their community? Ask students how they have contributed to their own community. Students can make a list of possible ways to get involved and perhaps select one or two upon which to act as a class.
- IL 2-22, the official registration number for Stateway Gardens, has been painted prominently by the artist. Why? Have students discuss the link between addresses and identity. Do different streets, neighborhoods, or cities conjure up different pictures in their minds? By what other means (cars, clothing, belongings, etc.) is status perceived?
- Are cityscapes pleasing to look at? Why or why not? Ask students to list buildings, parks, signs, etc. that they like. Have them discuss what things might be done to improve the appearance of the school’s neighborhood or their own neighborhood.

