

# LEON'S GIFTS

Pattern, space, color brighten  
a world of depression

**By Bill Hillburg**

Staff writer

**L**ike many talented artists, Leon Washington has experienced inner turmoil. But unlike most of his peers, Washington, 42, never had any formal training until he walked into Lillian Ashton's art therapy class 2½ years ago.

Then came the awakening.

For most of his adult life, Washington was bedeviled by debilitating depression and rejection. Today, his world is filled with vivid colors and bold designs. And his life is brightened by growing recognition of his newly discovered gifts.

"My art just comes to me," said Washington, a tall, athletic man whose gentle demeanor belies both his past problems and his current passion for painting. "I love my work because it makes me feel so much better about myself."

In August 1990 Washington was admitted to the Downey Community Health Center, a private psychiatric treatment center for adults. He was diagnosed with acute depression, schizophrenia and paranoia.

A few months after his admission, he reported to Ashton's art class, a therapy program offered at the center through the Downey Unified School District's Adult School.

"He asked me for paper, paints and brushes and just started working," recalled Ashton, who has been teaching at the center since 1973.

The results were astounding.

"Whatever he puts down is right," said Ashton, "From the beginning, Leon showed an instinctive sense of pattern, space, color and texture. He seemed to know all of the things that most talented people go to art school

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# ARTIST: Painting brighter future for Leon Washington

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to learn.”

Before long, Washington's paintings — including portraits, landscapes and intricate designs — were drawing the attention of fellow patients and center staffers, some of whom offered to buy his works.

Last summer, Ashton arranged for her star student to have a one-man show at the Downey Art Museum. Several of his works were purchased by museum visitors.

“Leon Washington is a true primitive,” said Scott Ward, director of the Downey Art Museum. In art parlance, “primitive” works are defined as those produced by untrained, self-taught artists.

“His talent is intuitive and he is working completely outside the mainstream of art movements,” added Ward. “His works provoke strong reactions because they have inherent power. There is also a punch and a magic to his work that is quite uncommon.”

Ashton said she has been careful not to overtrain her student. “I give him materials, explain their basic use and let him go,” she said. “That’s the way it should be.”

She said that Washington, a prolific painter who works at his craft as much as eight hours a day, has continued to improve. “His work has more and more feeling, especially in

the gestures and facial expressions of the people he paints,” Ashton said. “And he is constantly introducing new techniques.”

Julia Poirier, who teaches art at Downey High School, discerned another aspect of Washington's work when Ashton showed her a few samples.

“I had never met the man, and I was prepared not to be impressed,” she recalled. “But I was very impressed by his work. It was so sophisticated. I also knew when I saw his paintings that Washington must be an African-American.”

Poirier's analysis of Washington's talent was later bolstered when she visited a Los Angeles gallery that featured art works from Ethiopia.

“When I saw that art from Africa, it immediately reminded me of Leon's style,” Poirier said. “But there's no way he could have seen such works or been influenced by them.” She now refers to Washington as “an African Grandma Moses.”

Among the visitors to last summer's Downey Art Museum show was Washington's mother, Ann Boseman. “I was proud and surprised at the same time,” said Boseman, who lives in Inglewood. “This talent of his just came out of the blue.”

Boseman said her son had a happy childhood in Los Angeles' Crenshaw District. At Dorsey High School, his main passion was sports. He played defensive end for the Dons football team.

Boseman said that, outside of a smattering of instruction in public school, her son never had any training in art.

“Leon's troubles began a few years after high school,” said Boseman. “He suffered a bad back injury at work and became very depressed. He also became a loner and didn't like being around people. Over the years, he kept trying to get better, but his problems kept him down.”

Washington's downward spiral included a failed marriage (he is still close to his two sons), recurring treatments and hospitalizations, and a series of increasingly menial jobs. On several occasions, he was living on the streets as a homeless person.

“It was hard for me to meet people and make friends,” said Washington. “It was like everyone else was behind a closed door and I was on the outside without a key.”

“My art relaxes me and allows me to show the things that I care about,” he added.

Ashton and other staffers say Washington's artistic renown has given a huge boost to his self-esteem. It has also given him a clear career goal.

“When people first complimented me on my art, I couldn't imagine what they were doing,” said Washington. “Now I appreciate it. I want to be a professional artist and work all day on my paintings.”

Wendell Brumley, the center's program director, said that Washington's art awakening has brought him to a point where he will soon be able to cope with the world outside of the Downey Community Health Center.

“I've been working in this field for 20 years,” said Brumley. “This is the first time I've seen such great talent emerge in a patient. His depression has lifted, thanks to his art. And he is now able to interact with others in an adult way.”

Brumley said that Washington may soon be able to move to a board and care home. And Ashton is working on obtaining art supplies so that her student can continue to pursue his passion and make a modest living — a very real possibility — as an artist.

“Maybe it's right that my talent came out when it did,” said Washington. “Sometimes, I wonder why I didn't discover art a long time ago. But, then again, maybe I wouldn't have known what to do with it. Now I know.”