

# FORT GANSEVOORT



## How Aminah Robinson changed the world — and Ohio — with her art

Caleb McCleskey – Feb 4, 2025



Caleb McCleskey/The Ohio Newsroom

Off of Sunbury Road on Columbus's northeast side, the two-story home of Aminah Brenda Lynn Robinson stands apart from its neighbors. The front doors have painted images of smiling Black women surrounded by boldly colored sections of red, orange, blue, green and white. Instead of a grassy lawn, there's bricks and rocks. Instead of manicured shrubs, there's glass bottles poking off of dead branches.

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This house is special – it belonged to Aminah Robinson. When she died in 2015, she left it, along with the rest of her estate, to the Columbus Museum of Art (CMOA) and they created a home studio for local artists.

A.J Verdelle was the most recent resident living in Robinson’s home as a Writer’s Resident in 2024. She said marks of Robinson’s work were all over the space.

“It was full of the energy of the creation that she was aiming [for] – to be three dimensional,” Verdelle said. While Robinson created some of her most iconic work there – her first studio was simpler.

“As a very young child – when I say young I mean 3, 4, 5 – she built her own art studio under her bed to give herself privacy to make her own art,” said Deidre Hamlar, Director of the Aminah Brenda Lynn Robinson Legacy Project.

Robinson grew up on Columbus’s northeast side in Poindexter village with her parents and two sisters.

Hamlar said the neighborhood ignited Robinson’s artistic spark. As she took in its sights and sounds, she put them on paper.

“Early on she wanted to document what she saw around her,” Hamlar said.

Hamlar said Robinson’s parents noticed her gift early on, and they stoked her creativity.

“And [they] gave her everything from scrap paper, paper bags, the boxes of cartons that cereal came in,” Hamlar said.

Hamlar said Robinson learned how to create clay from mud and broken sticks – she made her own inks from boiling down vegetables – and she would use rocks and leaves from her own backyard to create some of her pieces.

“She just used everything in her midst. She learned how to craft these things into things that were important to her,” Hamlar said.

Robinson did not speak a lot as a young child. Instead, she used her art to communicate with others.

At eight years old, Robinson hosted an art show at the corner of Champion and Mt. Vernon Avenues. It would be the first of many throughout her lifetime.

After creating art overseas in Italy, Egypt, Peru in the 1970s and ‘80s, she returned to Columbus to have her first art showing at the CMOA in 1990.

In 2004, she became the first American woman with a solo show in Chile. That same year, she received the MacArthur ‘genius’ grant, which allowed her to build her art studio on Sunbury Road.

Hamlar says Columbus and Robinson left “lasting marks” on one another.

“Everybody owns a bit of Aminah and claims a bit of Aminah in this town. You can’t throw a stick without someone knowing who she is and someone claiming [her] or saying ‘I met her,’” Hamlar said.

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In 2020, the CMOA established the Aminah Robinson Legacy Project. The effort included exhibitions, the preservation of her work and the renovation of Robinson's home into a residency and studio for artists and writers.

Many of Robinson's pieces remain at the museum including her painting "School Days in Columbus, Ohio."

It uses bright watercolors and colored pencils to show several school buildings for Black students at the turn of the century.

Another piece located at the CMOA is "Uncle Alvin Says...in 1200 ad...The Millennium: The Razing and Destruction of Historic Poindexter."

The painting evokes the African community's presence in early Ohio, depicting African men, women and children sailing on what the painting calls "the beautiful Ohio Valley creeks on the very land that is Poindexter Village" in the King-Lincoln Bronzeville neighborhood.

In 2020 – 5 years after her death – the CMOA put on an exhibition of her seven decades of work called 'Raggin' On.'

"It meant that the work rags on and on and on, that what she creates is timeless. Basically it starts with an idea, but once it's created it lives forever and it lives forever in the minds and thoughts of others who perceive it," Hamlar said.

Robinson's legacy doesn't just live in museums and galleries. Her influence is felt by writers and artists in Columbus and across the country. A.J. Verdelle knows that first-hand.

"Aminah Robinson has not been gone a long time and there's a way in which I feel like she's still in the present tense. She's still being collected," Verdelle said.

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