

Transcript

The Arts Reflect Who We Are feat. Dean Phylicia Rashad

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[00:00:00] **Frank:** Have you ever wondered why it seems like black artists always have to fight for recognition? Let's dig into it.

Welcome to HU2U, the podcast where we bring today's important topics and stories from Howard University right to you. I'm Frank Tramble, today's host, and I am here with one of my favorite people on this campus, the illustrious, the amazing, the inspiring, Phylicia Rashad, Dean of the Chadwick A. Boseman College of Fine Arts.

How are you doing?

[00:00:40] **Phylicia:** I am doing good. And I mean good. Not well. Good.

[00:00:48] **Frank:** Thank you so much for joining us on the podcast. And every time that anyone sees you, I think the thing that is the most exciting part is the joy, and that not only streams from you, but that you give to others. And I think the smiling faces on the daily basis and what you've done with this university is amazing.

So, let's dig into this interesting fact. And I want you to react to this: black performers represented about 38% of all artists on the Billboard's chart from 2012 to 2020, and yet only received 26.7% of the Grammy nominations during the same time period. Talk to me about why do you think that's happening?

[00:01:27] **Phylicia:** Who knows? You wonder about such things, you know. You wonder about such things. But for me, the greatness and the, and the merit comes from the fact that we continue. We continue to do our work. We continue to pursue ourselves in our work. We continue to pursue excellence in our work, to refine ourselves in our work, and to offer the best of our work in everything we do.

And that's what really, really, really counts. 100 years from now, nobody will remember who won a Grammy this year, but a well-written song will still be sung, a beautiful poem will be remembered and have its effect, a great play will expound on themes that could still resonate

100 years from now, and a film — a really good film — will inspire youth to dream higher and higher and higher. It's the work that counts.

[00:02:36] **Frank:** I, I think you make such a good point. And in fact, let's take it back, because when you think about, you know, the arts in general, fine arts, there's so much of it that is, kind of, embedded in our culture. You know, you think about how music and songs, you know, like, Wade in the Water, it's more than just music. It used to tell stories and tips for how to... for fugitive slaves not to be captured.

So, when you think about, like, black culture, can you talk a little bit about what is it that it truly means, the fine arts and black culture? And how is it so tied together in who we are?

[00:03:09] **Phylicia:** Well, the arts reflect who we are. 100 years from now, nobody will remember who, who received which reward, but 100 years from now, people can look back on art and see how we lived. Because art is, is a direct reflection of it.

We're contemplating ourselves as individuals, yes. But we are part of the fabric of a culture, a culture that's hundreds of years old. And even though we're not always conscious of what all of that is and what it means, it lives in us and finds its way through us in our artistic expressions. It's very important. And it's important to and educate our young so that they see it and understand what it means.

It isn't that they'll all become artists. That isn't the point, but everyone should appreciate it for what it is.

When you look at it work by John Biggers, you have to understand his, his roots and his origins are in Gastonia, North Carolina. And you look at his very early works and you see that reflected in the hands of his subjects and in their feet. You see it very clearly.

When you look at a work by Bisa Butler, a great textile artist of today, who's exhibited all over the world, a graduate of Howard University, come through that fine arts program, who started out as an architecture major. But her drawings were too, had too much flourish for the teacher. They thought, "This is too much." And she didn't know what to do. And it was an English teacher who took her by the hand, walked her across the campus into the dean's office and said, "Here is an artist." And she began her study there. But even with her studies, she didn't find her particular medium until well after graduation. But she found it.

And she talks about it. She talks about quilting. She talks about what quilting means. She talks about the storytelling and embedding messages in the quilts. She talks about it. She's articulate about it.

So, when we hear music, when we hear, let's say, the arrangements to The Wiz or Dreamgirls, that's Harold Wheeler, a graduate of Howard University, a graduate of Howard University who arranged, orchestrated, and conducted the Olympics. Hello? Yes, he did. Yes, he did.

[00:05:56] **Frank:** A known fact, yeah.

[00:05:57] **Phylicia:** Yeah. Dancing with the Stars, yes, he did. But his works are... his Broadway works are outstanding. Lena Horne, the Smithsonian, wants his papers, wants his arrangement. And they reflect our culture. Huh? Yes, it's important stuff.

[00:06:16] **Frank:** Yes. Yes. No, it truly is. It truly is. And I think one of the things that's an interesting... well, I, I want to take it back to this point here, where we talk about fine arts. Can you talk a little bit about what is the diaspora of fine arts? And I think sometimes we only think of, you know, maybe just the musicians and the artists. And what is your definition of the diaspora of fine arts.

[00:06:39] **Phylicia:** Oh, my goodness. It, it encompasses, it encompasses creative expression, artistic, creative expression. Yes, there is the music. All right, performance is one thing. Composition, arrangement, orchestration, recording, or another, it encompasses this art. Mm-hmm, there is painting, there is sculpture, there's ceramics, there's metalwork, there is digital art. It's a lot.

Also, art preservation, conservation. There's also museum studies for curating and creating exhibitions. It's a lot.

And when we talk about theater, people always go directly to what they see on stage. And that's good. But what you're seeing is more than you know, because you're seeing a playwright's work, you're seeing a director's work, you're seeing designer's work for lights, for sound, for costume, for set. You are seeing dramaturgical work. You're seeing a choreographer's work. You're hearing a musical arranger's work.

And upon all of that, you're getting some history somewhere, some political science someplace else, some philosophy, someplace else, great storytelling all the way around. It encompasses many things.

Within the fine arts are inherent so many academic disciplines that are not readily perceived and understood. There's mathematics. There's physics. There's geometry. There's philosophy. There's poetry. There's literature. There's language. Chemistry, in the photo lab, that's one of our fine arts disciplines, too, photography.

[00:08:35] **Frank:** I didn't even know that, yeah.

[00:08:36] **Phylicia:** Oh, yeah.

[00:08:38] **Frank:** Yeah, I see.

[00:08:38] **Phylicia:** Yeah. And when you talk about metal sculpture, that's some serious understanding. You better know what you're doing.

[00:08:45] **Frank:** That's for sure. That is for sure.

[00:08:47] **Phylicia:** You better know what you're doing. The fine arts really encompass a lot.

[00:08:52] **Frank:** So, as a communicator, I think that, sometimes, we tend to forget the value of fine arts is, is even more broadly than if you have chosen a career fully inside of it. As someone who is a product of two musicians as parents... I mean my mother, jazz violinist, classical violinist, grew up going to the Nutcracker, watching her perform. My father was a drummer and owned a music store. And that led me to even going off and singing for years, performing with my mother, getting an opportunity to be in plays. While I have not gone down the route of being full-time artist, those experiences really crafted a lot of my personality, the confidence I have, my ability to be in front of people. There's so much that I learned from it.

And as we talk about, you know, one of the, the things that's always hard about fine arts is when federal budgets and things tend to decrease, fine arts tends to be the first thing that gets cut. And to, even to your experience, you know, seeing that the College of Fine Arts, which existed and then had to due to federal dollars being pulled away, you had to be rolled into the College of Arts and Sciences. And then, seeing how Chadwick A Boseman fought with others, you know, and advocated for that. And now to see you back here as a part of the college reiterating itself and coming and re-immersing itself back into the community, can you talk just a little bit about, why do people miss the full value of fine arts? Because I think it's even more than just you having the, the career in it.

[00:10:21] **Phylicia:** I think people miss the value of it because we live in it all the time and take it for granted. Nature is the greatest artist of all. When we look at a landscape and it's changing

colors within a season, we take it for granted because it happens every year. When we perceive a sunrise, even though the sunrise is different every single day, how many of us really take the time to breathe and take that in to observe those colors, the brilliance of them that are happening? So, what... Naturally, we live in art. Our bodies are a work of art.

[00:11:14] **Frank:** Yes. Mm-hmm.

[00:11:15] **Phylicia:** Divine structure.

[00:11:17] **Frank:** Yes, yes, yes.

[00:11:18] **Phylicia:** Says "in His image."

[00:11:21] **Frank:** All right. Now, we're going to start preaching here in a moment.

[00:11:24] **Phylicia:** But it's true.

[00:11:25] **Frank:** It's true. It is so true. It is.

[00:11:26] **Phylicia:** It is the truth. It's the truth, you know. And so, we see in museums, we see, we see works of art that depict a starry night. We see works that depict workers in the field. We see works that depict birds in flight. But it's, it's because art is life itself. So, like breathing, we take it for granted.

[00:11:56] **Frank:** So, I, I have a thing about watching certain types of movies. And for some reason, I like the end-of-the-world type movies and, you know, the storm is coming and we got to go into underground and try to figure out how we're going to live over these next 1 00 years or whatever happens after that.

But one of the things that's always, kind of, key in those stories is the fight in those moments for the arts. And it's not prevalent always in the every day, but in those moments, it's always the case of, well, who's going to grab the Mona Lisa? Who's going to grab the original Bible? Who's going to grab all of these relics that are key to understanding who we are so we don't forget where we came from? Good and bad, you know, there's ability to learn from our past. And I think that's where the arts come in to place.

So, there's an opportunity always for the arts to be a recording of history. But also, it works the opposite way, too, right? Art can be the inspiration for change, right.

[00:12:52] **Phylicia:** Yes.

[00:12:52] **Frank:** So, can you talk a little bit about what are some of the pieces of art that have inspired you to change or you've seen be a catalyst to a major moment in our history?

[00:13:03] **Phylicia:** Oh, my goodness. In the fall of 2022, in the Department of Theater, there was an opportunity for students to record plays as a play reading. And these plays were written by Howard University graduates. In 1919 and 1921, I do believe, and had I not read those plays, and this was my first time reading them, I would've thought that the rhetoric only began in the 1960s.

One play dealt with a soldier returning from the World War to his home in a small town in South Carolina, only to find out that his father had been lynched for disputing a landowner, as they were sharecroppers. And his father spoke the truth, and the landowner didn't like it. So, they organized this lynching that had taken place two months before he arrived home. And no one told him. And they didn't tell him because he was on the battlefield fighting for the country. And they, they wanted him to be able to focus on that.

He came home very proud, having received a medal of honor, the French Legion Medal for his bravery, presented to him by the generals of the French Army. And they were so proud of that. And only after being in his home for almost 30 minutes did he discover that his father would not be there ever again. And why? And the rage that overcame him. And he talked about being shipped off as fodder to die in a war, fighting for a country that couldn't and wouldn't protect his own father.

That was in the early part of the 20th century. This rhetoric comes again in the '60s with the Vietnam War.

[00:15:19] **Frank:** Yeah. Yeah, it, it's all connected.

[00:15:21] **Phylicia:** You see?

[00:15:22] **Frank:** Yeah.

[00:15:23] **Phylicia:** You see. And the other play had to do with women and the right to vote, what they were willing to do to get that right. And now here we are at a time where voters' rights are threatened blatantly, I mean, unabashedly, unapologetically. And we are going to accept that. As taxpaying citizens, we're going to accept that? The bell rings because we speak the truth.

[00:16:00] **Frank:** And, and this is always true. And that is something you've always said to, whenever that bell rings, the truth is being spoken.

[00:16:05] **Phylicia:** Mm-hmm, you know. So, this puts social issue right up front and center to an audience who has come to be entertained. Yes, you will be entertained. You will also be enlightened.

That was in, that was in the beginning. That was the early part of the 20th century. And in the 1960s, we see a plethora of theater that is putting social issues upfront and center. Douglas Turner Ward's *Day of Absence*, are you familiar with it?

[00:16:40] **Frank:** I am, mm-hmm.

[00:16:41] **Phylicia:** What a hoot, right?

[00:16:43] **Frank:** Yeah.

[00:16:45] **Phylicia:** But a revelation, yes?

[00:16:47] **Frank:** Yes, yes, yes.

[00:16:48] **Phylicia:** What happens if all the people you despise, denigrate take for granted who perform all the tasks that you need to sit in your high seat to disregard others? What happens if you wake up one morning and they're just simply not there?

[00:17:09] **Frank:** You could almost say that art is, sometimes, gives an opportunity to show a mirror to the decisions that people are trying to make.

[00:17:16] **Phylicia:** does do that. Holds as to a mirror up to nature.

[00:17:20] **Frank:** Yup, mm-hmm.

[00:17:21] **Phylicia:** So, in contemporary times, Dominique Morisseau from Detroit, the works that she has written, *Skeleton Crew*, about workers in an auto factory. So, these works that I've participated in really inspired an expanded point of view and understanding. In performing that play, I became acutely aware of the fact that there is nothing, nothing that I use physically that is not the result of someone's labor.

When you think about it, the laces that tie your shoes, the fork that helps you feed yourself, the plate on which your food rests, simple things like your hair pins and your safety pins, simple

things, the result of somebody else's labor. Do we regard these people the way we should? Do we have this regard for one another that we should have as human beings? Or, do we toss them off and say, "Well, that really doesn't affect me. I mean, that's in another realm doesn't affect my paycheck. I'm okay." Oh, but it does affect you.

[00:18:44] **Frank:** Well, let's talk about the Skeleton Crew, because seeing that play, as a native Detroiter, I remember telling you this, I came up to see it, that Broadway play brought so many home memories back for me, having family members, having worked in the plants. And, you know, I also think about the arts being necessary for also feeling and hearing the stories and telling the stories that go untold because, of course, you're an amazing actress and one of the things that's always interesting is the fact that I know you as a person, but also when I see you in acting form, you embody it and I forget who you are.

And the moment I saw you in that play, I could only think about so many people that I knew who were that person, and that I loved those people and that how they were really critical for me being able to move into the spaces I've moved into.

So, art, in a sense, constantly make sure that people can be connected to the stories that we miss, because I don't live in Detroit anymore, and I don't have that opportunity to see people as much as I had before.

In your roles... let's talk a little bit about you. In your roles that you've chosen to play, are there any that you feel that are... or what are the ones I should say, are the ones that you feel are... have been the most critical to black culture? I think one of the things that I know about you is that you've been very deliberate about what roles you choose, what message it's sending, and what you want it to do for our people.

So, can you talk just a little bit about which roles that you felt are really the ones that you knew were going to affect black culture, or maybe didn't even know at the time were going to do that?

[00:20:16] **Phylicia:** Well, there's Clair Huxtable. We were having a great time working together, meaning the entire cast. I have to be honest and say the cultural impact that it would have, that it did have, did not occur to me when we were in our very early stages, and even through the eight years of it. I was more focused on the work, and it was my mother who would constantly remind me of the significance of what we were doing on a larger scale.

It would be some years after. Of course, you know, we were always meeting people everywhere we went to buy groceries or at a public appearance who would say, "Thank you.

What this work has given us, it has taught me to listen to my children. It has made our marriage a happier place. It has inspired me to become a lawyer. It has inspired me to become a doctor. It has inspired me to become an educator.” We would hear these things.

But it would be when I would travel internationally and I would meet black people from other countries. A young man made his way through a crowd. He was from Germany to tell me, “Before your show, we had nothing. Growing up in Germany,” he said, “we had nothing. When your show came, we had everything.”

When I met Nelson Mandela, he thanked me for this show. And he said, “I watched it on Robbins Island. I watched it with my guard. It softened him.”

[00:22:09] **Frank:** Wow. Wow. That, that's, that's huge, yeah,

[00:22:17] **Phylcia:** I know. It's humbling.

[00:22:19] **Frank:** Yeah, it's very... yeah. So, so, so a lot of the roles, you, you just didn't know that it was going to be as impactful?

[00:22:26] **Phylcia:** And then, there were roles that impacted me, like, on Ester in August Wilson's Gem of the Ocean. He describes her as a woman who's about 87, 85. But by virtue of what she carries, she's over 200-something years old. She carries the memories of the middle passage. She wears them on her clothing. She remembers everyone.

It's a line of remembrance that is handed down from Aunt Ester to Aunt Ester. She was trained from the time she was a young girl by the one who proceeded her.

And what is her purpose? What does she do? One day, Mr. Wilson said in rehearsal, “Well, the truth of the matter is that she's a great psychologist. She understands people.” She did understand people, but she also carried spiritual memory that she could awaken in others. And with that came a remembrance within them that reinforced a sense of purpose in living and how they would live.

What I loved most about that role was overcoming the fear, the anxiety, the trepidation, the hesitance to grow old.

So, I was being interviewed by a young woman in California. She was in her 20s. And she was, she was saying, “What, what would you tell somebody my age about, about getting old? What, what advice would you give?” And I looked at her, I said, “Honey, I don't think you have to

worry about it because you're too scared to live. You're lucky if you live long enough to ghetto."

There is, there is virtue in it. I began to observe elderly women, women 80 years old and older. I began to observe them. And what I saw in women this age who had lived with purpose was a brightness, was an energy, was a light in the eye and a clip in the speech.

[00:24:36] **Frank:** Yes, yes.

[00:24:37] **Phylicia:** I loved that because it also put me in memory of the elderly women that I had known in Texas, in Louisiana, in South Carolina as a child, and what that, what that feeling was like to be in their presence, that reassuring feeling. Just by their presence, everything was all right. Everything was okay. We had everything we needed.

[00:25:07] **Frank:** Yeah, I love that. So, you are in a great position right now to change the world again, I think, with leading the Chadwick A. Boseman College of Fine Arts. You have so many talented... And when, when I come to the plays, the dance performance that we saw a couple weeks ago, what was the name of it again? The...

[00:25:26] **Phylicia:** Vivify.

[00:25:27] **Frank:** Yes, Vivify. My wife and I, we walked out so just amazed at the talent that is on this campus... And as we look at these problems and issues in the world and we think about the next generation, where do you think we are? Are we in a good place? Is the Chadwick A. Boseman College of Fine Arts going to be able to make a difference in the fine arts and black culture?

[00:25:51] **Phylicia:** Yes, absolutely. It already has. A cadre of our art students from the Department of Art traveled to Miami for Arts Basel at the invitation of Microsoft. And during that time, one of our artists, a senior who has just graduated, was recognized by the NBA. And they commissioned him to do a piece which they featured at the All-Star game. People don't understand. You see these things and you think, "Oh, that's like..." That energy is entering you through your eyesight.

[00:26:28] **Frank:** Mm-hmm, yes, yes.

[00:26:29] **Phylicia:** Yes, it is. Yes, it is. And that's just one of our students in art. Our students in the art department are amazing with the work that they create. They come in the office all the time to show me.

[00:26:46] **Frank:** And this is true. You know, one of the things that I think people don't understand is how involved you are. There's not a moment I've ever walked in your office where there isn't four or five students that are coming in just to say "hey" again and to show some work that they're doing again because you are so connected to the students. I mean, even the artist you're referring to, Eric January, whose piece that sits in your office is still one I'm trying to steal, you know.

[00:27:10] **Phylicia:** I know. I know, but forget about it.

[00:27:11] **Frank:** If it comes up missing, you know where it is. So, we, we don't have to know. It's, it's going to be with me. But seeing that work, there, there's been... I get emotional, kind of, ties and, and, and connections into those spaces. And, and I think that what you're doing in inspiring these students, I know I feel like it's going to be in great hands.

So, you know, if I'm listening to this podcast, I'm listening you speak, I want to support and I want to help, what are the things, the top tier ways that people can support fine arts, black culture, and of course the Chadwick A. Boseman College of Fine Arts?

[00:27:43] **Phylicia:** Come and view Genesis in the Gallery of Art. This is a personal collection of Dr. Ron and Mrs. Patricia Walters, personal collection of African-American art that Mrs. Walters had collected over the years, over decades. Astounding. And everyone who comes in walks out with great appreciation. With that appreciation, come and ask what you can do. Monetary contributions are always welcome.

[00:28:22] **Frank:** Yes. Yes, they are, always.

[00:28:24] **Phylicia:** Always welcome, because we need to build that scholarship that funds our students' education. Because oftentimes our students come and they need that kind of help. They need that financial support. And we are focused on finding ways to give it to them because we don't want to lose our good students, you know.

[00:28:45] **Frank:** 10 years from now, where do you see Chadwick A. Boseman College of Fine Arts? What do you see it being?

[00:28:52] **Phylicia:** Ah, it is a repository of knowledge and research for arts in the African diaspora, a premier institution for development, education of young artists. Innovative works.

[00:29:20] **Frank:** Yeah, in a new facility, I hear, right?

[00:29:22] **Phylicia:** And in a new facility that will be shared with the Cathy Hughes School of Communications. That is something to look forward to. That is exciting. And that is challenging.

[00:29:33] **Frank:** Yeah. And I don't think everyone knows how that connection has already existed for so many years. I mean, even Chadwick A. Boseman and his best friend met, right? Tell us a little bit about that quick story.

[00:29:43] **Phylicia:** Yeah, Logan Coles. Oh, these were two men who were active on campus, so they would undoubtedly. And, and they found themselves in a very deep friendship that lasted through the years, all through Howard University, through graduation. In those beginning years, those struggling years, when one has just come out and trying to find one's way, that connection remained.

So, as Chadwick's career was developing, so was Logan's. He was writing and producing. And Chadwick was writing as well. Chadwick was in New York. He called me one time, all excited. I thought, "Oh, my goodness, what film is this going to be? What Broadway show is he cast in now? What is it?"

And it wasn't either of those things. He was teaching. He was teaching young people. He's teaching young people in Harlem. And he was so excited about it. It was the greatest thing he would ever do to hear him speak this way. And he meant it.

They come together in years later to form... well, to form a production company, really, they did. And storytelling and building stories, things that they would produce. But, but Chadwick was called away. Logan continues.

And the work is great. And this is something that, that I want to see happen in this coming year. And that is a production of Chadwick's play, *As Your Blue*. I want to see it. I want to see it with professional actors. I want to see it captured and recorded in a way that supports the Boseman College. Yes, that's what I want to see.

[00:31:38] **Frank:** Well, I know if it's a vision of yours, I know it's going to come true. So, we're going to do a quick round robin. I want you to tell me just the first things that come to your mind.

[00:31:47] **Phylicia:** Oh, no.

[00:31:47] **Frank:** Okay. All right. We're going to put you on the spot here.

[00:31:50] **Phylicia:** Okay.

[00:31:50] **Frank:** All right. So, quick answers. Various arts that have changed your perception of the world, okay? Movie.

[00:31:56] **Phylicia:** Inception.

[00:31:57] **Frank:** Song.

[00:31:58] **Phylicia:** Oh, there's so many of them, come on.

[00:32:02] **Frank:** I know, I know.

[00:32:03] **Phylicia:** Any song?

[00:32:04] **Frank:** Any... Yeah, anyone. First one to come to mind, song.

[00:32:06] **Phylicia:** This little light of mine?

[00:32:07] **Frank:** All right. Book or play.

[00:32:10] **Phylicia:** Toni Morrison's A Mercy.

[00:32:15] **Frank:** Okay, poem.

[00:32:17] **Phylicia:** Status, written by my mother.

[00:32:20] **Frank:** Piece of art, photography, sculpture.

[00:32:23] **Phylicia:** John Biggers' Quilting Bee.

[00:32:25] **Frank:** All right. And any other piece of art that resonates, dance.

[00:32:31] **Phylicia:** Oh, Revelations.

[00:32:35] **Frank:** All right. All right. Well, thank you so much, Dean Rashad, for joining us on HU2U, the podcast where we tell Howard stories and bring them straight to you. Again, thank you so much for joining us. I know, again, that the students are so lucky to have you. This university is lucky to have you. Black culture is lucky to have you.

Thank you for joining us on HU2U, the podcast where we dig into today's top stories, all from Howard University, and bring them straight to you. I'm Frank Tramble, today's host. And until next time, thank you.