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TAKE A CLOSER LOOK

***A Time to Unite*, 1976**

by Mitchell Caton, Calvin Jones, Justine DeVan, Tony Campbell, Grant York, and community members
Restored by Bernard Williams in 2003

41st Street and Drexel Avenue, Chicago, Illinois

Riding on the euphoria of Barack Obama's election to the presidency, I chose the mural *A Time to Unite* as my favorite work of historical American art in Chicago. Although painted in 1976 by Mitchell Caton, Calvin Jones, Justine DeVan, Tony Campbell, and Grant York; this mural speaks to the combination of grace, urgency, and conviction that Obama and his campaign embodied in 2008.

The artists used a collage effect to present images of African American history, which can be a metaphor for President Obama's ability to plumb the multiple layers of the American experience—both his and that of so many Americans. The mural progresses from an image of the sharecropper's migration to the central figure who points at the viewer in a call to action—it is time for change. Standing in front of this looming image, one imagines lining up behind the row of eager citizens painted on the left—signaling action and hope for the future.

A vibrant interlude of West African references comes next: a mask, Kente and Ewe cloth patterns, and dancing drummers are all awash in an electrifying blue. According to Calvin Jones, Mitchell Caton created that section in response to Jones's blues players portrayed on the far right of the mural. The flow of this collaborative effort is undeniable and makes this work one of the best examples from the Black Mural and Chicago Public Art Movements, which was spearheaded in the late 1960s and into the 1970s by such collectives as OBAC (Organization of Black American Culture) and such artists as William Walker and John Pittman Weber. The final section of the mural represents Chicago's tenement housing and the blues legacy of Maxwell Street. A visual narrative of rich cultural traditions alongside adversity prevails here. This mural reminds us that this is a time to unite and, yes, we can.



A Time to Unite, 1976, (detail) Image provided courtesy of Chicago Public Art Group. Photo by Bernard Williams.



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The Chicago-based Terra Foundation for American Art is proud to sponsor *American Art American City*, a Chicago-wide initiative designed to promote awareness of and appreciation for historical American art. Between October 2007 and December 2008, approximately 30 partner organizations around the city are offering a wide array of American art activities, including exhibitions and tours of important and rarely seen collections, television programming, lectures, and more.

TAKE A CLOSER LOOK, a campaign in conjunction with *American Art American City*, is designed to highlight the wealth of American art treasures in Chicago. A group of prominent Chicagoans have shared their personal responses to a favorite work of historical American art, whether on display in a Chicago museum, park, school, or downtown plaza.