

THINGS TO DO ARTS

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‘Black Matriarchs’ series at New Britain Museum of American Art honors legacy of Black women in the community



There are 11 portraits in Kenneth A. Larson’s “Black Matriarchs” series, spread out among the rooms of the Landers House side of the New Britain Museum of American Art.

By CHRISTOPHER ARNOTT | carnott@courant.com | Hartford Courant
June 25, 2023 at 6:00 a.m.

In the late 1970s, New Britain social studies teacher Jimmie Elizabeth Nkonoki-Ward wanted to honor the women who’d taught her Black history and served as her role models. She commissioned an artist friend, Kenneth Larson, to do a series of portraits of these women, which he completed in 1988. Now they are part of the New Britain Museum of American Art’s latest exhibit, [The Black Matriarchs Series](#).

The portraits, out of public view for decades, have now been neatly arranged around the various rooms of the historic Landers House, the oldest and coziest section of the [New Britain Museum of American Art](#). They are hung over fireplaces or ornate tables in areas where you can sit and read, browse the library of art books or do family activities.

Many of the subjects were members of The Every Woman’s Club of New Britain, but the main bond is that they inspired Nkonoki-Ward. Some were well-known in the community, while the achievements of others were unsung. One subject named Monica, who was in her 20s, was meant to represent the promise of the next generation. She is now a neurologist who educates about brain health in the Black community.



The portraits “Mrs. Virginia Morehead” (left) and “Mrs. Meana McDew” at the New Britain Museum of American Art.

The portraits are awe striking just due to the uplifting concept that created them, but they are also fine art. Larson’s work is beautifully understated. The women are portrayed as serious and focused but not severe. Larson uses both thin expressive strokes and strong wide framing shapes. He captures the women’s hair and the collars of their blouses as carefully as their faces.

The way his work is exhibited would surely please Larson, who was active in local architectural preservation projects and wrote extensively about New Britain’s history. The series, originally titled simply “Matriarchs,” was previously on display at Central Connecticut State University in the 1990s. The artist died in 1994.

In a video on the museum’s website, Nkonoki-Ward, who was named Connecticut Teacher of the Year in 1985 and served on the New Britain school board in the late 1990s, talks about how she came to start collecting and commissioning work by Black artists. She calls Larson “the first artist I ever got to know closely” and praises how these women are being seen.

The Black Matriarchs Series is on display through Dec. 31 at the New Britain Museum of American Art, 56 Lexington St., New Britain. Visiting hours are Wednesday through Sunday from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., with hours extended until 8 p.m. on Thursday. Admission is \$15, \$12 for seniors and free for those under 18. nbmaa.org.

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