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Darrell Walker On the court and off, basketball star Darrell Walker is a savvy competitor. This time the coach has jumped into art collecting.

By *FELLEY LAWSON, Democrat-Gazette Feature Writer* November 17, 1996

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Caption: Photos by RICK McFARLAND, Arkansas Democrat-Gazette

'Art is one of my passions.'

"Art's not for everybody, but you never know if you don't try it. Somebody happened to pull my coattails and said, 'Try this.'

The Federal Express guy has just made Darrell Walker a happy man.

Along a comfortable west Little Rock street where most driveways are marked with basketball goals, the delivery man had pulled his truck up in front of Walker's Arkansas home earlier on this fall day and unloaded a hulking canvas, an acrylic abstraction dripping in color.

Titled "Silver Cage," it's the 54- by 71-inch work of Sam Gilliam, an artist whose style has caught the former Razorback's eye.

Walker is pacing around like a starter benched in the last seconds of a tied ballgame. He obviously can't wait to get his massive hands on the painting that is still protectively encased in thick plastic wrap. Sure, he'll talk about his growing collection of art by black artists -- but first, he's got to get a true look at his newest addition.

Tearing into the wrap with the help of a visitor, he smiles approvingly at what he finds inside.

Gilliam, he announces, is "baaad!" And the painting doesn't disappoint.

Maybe you know Darrell Walker only from his athletic record: A standout at the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville under former Coach Eddie Sutton, Walker was the 12th overall pick in the NBA draft his first year after college. His 10-year NBA career began with the New York Knicks; he also played for the Denver Nuggets, Washington Bullets, Detroit Pistons and Chicago Bulls.

Two years ago, he became an assistant head coach with the Toronto Raptors NBA expansion franchise, and this year he was elevated to head coach.

Somewhere along the way, under the tutelage of Knicks teammate Bernard King, Walker added art connoisseur to his resume. His carefully selected collection includes the works of artists Romare Bearden, Jacob Lawrence, John Wilson, Allen R. Crite and Gilliam.

After taking one more long look at Gilliam's "Silver Cage" --propped against and almost covering a wall in the hallway of his home -- Walker smiles, collapses his skyscraping, string-bean frame into a cushy white chair in the living room, rips open a snack-size bag of Fritos and pops open a cold Coors Light.

Now he's ready to talk art.

He's ready to share his art, too -- through Dec. 13, the University of Arkansas at Little Rock presents "Twentieth Century African-American Art from the Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Darrell Walker" in Gallery I of the university's Fine Arts Building.

A catalog published for the show includes an essay written by David C. Driskell, a black art historian and professor of art at the University of Maryland at College Park. Walker will share part of the profits from the sale of the catalog with the Florence Crittenton Home for pregnant teen-agers, which he serves as a board member.

Since he began collecting six years ago, Walker has been choosy about the pieces he buys, poring over artists' resumes and viewing slides of their work before he buys anything. He scours magazines including Art in America, America Visions and Art News, meets artists and educates himself about various mediums.

It suits him fine to share with others the range of works he's grown to love. After all, "Art is one of my passions," says Walker. "When I'm on the road, I go to museums, galleries. I love it."

Atlanta artist Kevin Cole will even go out on a limb and call Walker "possessed."

"He'll call me and say, 'I'm in so and so city. Tell me a museum I can go to,' " says Cole. "Anytime he comes to Atlanta, I take him to artists' studios. He would call the artist and tell them who he was, and that he was interested in seeing their work. That's a side to him a lot of people don't know."

"He loves to go to the High Museum" in Atlanta, Cole adds. "We'll go to museum after museum. Then he'll say, 'Tell me a show I should go see.' We stay up 'til 4 in the morning looking at art. I was just in Chicago with him, and we walked around to 17 different museums."

Cole and Walker became friends during their college days when they pledged Kappa Alpha Phi -- Walker at UA-Fayetteville, Cole at the University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff. The two have stayed in touch during the years, and when Walker began collecting, he added some of Cole's work to his collection.

A member of the art faculty at Georgia State University and the North Springs Arts and Science Magnet Program in Atlanta, Cole was commissioned to do a 15-story, 8,200-square-foot mural for the '96 Olympics.

He scaled down a little for a bendable plywood piece Walker commissioned him to do. "Bright Moments" is an energetic splash of color over Walker's mantel that incorporates vivid colors, African symbols and patterns and symbols of family, as Walker requested.

Walker's family includes his wife, Lisa, a Little Rock native he met at UA-Fayetteville. The family includes five children, ranging in age from 15 to 3 -- Felicia, Darrell Jr., Jarrell, Jarrett and Jarren. The Walkers call Little Rock home and live here during off season.

Lisa Walker works with her husband to seek out pieces that celebrate the talents of black artists.

Some of Cole's work will be included in the 30 that Walker is lending to UALR for the exhibit, which will be open from 9 a.m. until 5 p.m. on Mondays, Tuesdays and Thursdays, 7 p.m. on Wednesdays and 4 p.m. on Fridays. The galleries are also open from 2 to 5 p.m. Sundays. Admission is free.

Besides the work of emerging artists like Cole and Margo Humphrey, there'll be paintings in the show by Gilliam, prints by Bearden and Lawrence and works by Wilson and Crite. Walker's exhibition is a companion with another display of Lawrence's work -- "Migration Series" -- at the Arkansas Arts Center until Jan. 12.

Walker, a Chicago native, sees the exhibit as a way to educate those in his adopted hometown about the contributions of black artists, past and present. He hopes it'll be a diverse group of viewers that drops by UALR's Fine Arts Building to see the exhibit -- particularly young people and athletes who might come because of their interest in Walker and his career.

"Art's not for everybody," he concedes, "but you never know if you don't try it. Somebody happened to pull my coattails and said, 'Try this.' "

This isn't the first time Walker has used his basketball fame to try to help young people get a perspective on the world outside their day-to-day routine. During his years in the NBA, Walker has conducted basketball camps in Arkansas -- some in Little Rock's Highland Park housing project -- where he coupled teaching the fundamentals of basketball with an anti-drug message.

He's told before of having to step over people on his block who were high on cocaine to get to basketball practice as a teen. He once told reporters that his mom, Joyce Turner, warned him to stay off drugs. "She told me if I ever went to jail, I'd stay there," he's said. "And she meant it."

Walker's love of art and desire to expand his collection show he's got his eye on goals besides those at either end of a court.

If people are taken aback by the fact that a sports figure could have diverse interests, he would remind them that, "There's more to Michael Jordan" than what fans see on game days.

"He's a businessman, he's intelligent, articulate. He can talk about anything," says Walker. "And Sidney Moncrief," -- another former Razorback who graduated to the NBA -- "he's successful off the basketball court, too. He's involved in the community."

No matter where his NBA career has taken him, Walker has stayed involved in the community, too. Lending "Twentieth Century African-American Art" to UALR is only his latest contribution. But it's one he takes a lot of pride and pleasure in.

Cole relates a conversation he had with Walker: " `When the times comes to retire,' I said, `what are you going to do?' Darrell said, `I'm going to wake up in the morning and look at my artwork.' "

But as Walker gets comfortable hearing players call him coach, retirement doesn't appear to be in the picture anytime soon. Walker seems happy. In fact, it's been said that, for a player, working in the NBA is the best job in the world.

"To do something you would do for fun at the Boys Club and get paid to do it? Yeah," he grins. "it's the best job in the world."

Darrell Walker

DATE AND PLACE OF BIRTH -- March 9, 1961, Chicago.

BESIDES BASKETBALL, MY FAVORITE SPORT IS -- Golf.

BEST ASSET -- My personality. I'm personable to people I really know.

FAVORITE JUNK FOOD -- Sour apple Jolly Ranchers candy.

FAVORITE ARTIST -- That's a tough one. I have a lot of Jacob Lawrence's work, some Sam Gilliams and Romare Bearden's.

I'M PROUDEST OF -- Meeting my wife and marrying her.

WORST HABIT -- I've got a few of them. Probably impatience.

BEST TIME OF THE DAY -- Night, because of working in the NBA.

GOLF HANDICAP -- About a 25. It's high; I'm not ashamed to admit it.

FAVORITE MUSIC -- Jazz and blues.

BEST ADVICE I'VE BEEN GIVEN -- To cherish every day that I'm in the NBA, because it's the best job in the world, whether you're a coach or a player.

ONE WORD TO SUM ME UP -- Fun, if I'm with the right people.

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