Dr. Robert E. Steele and his wife, Jean, have been collecting works on paper by African American Artists for more than four decades. They purchased their first two works in 1969.

At the time, the Steeles were looking at and studying art. “Early on, we developed our sense of direction, learning about what is quality art, regardless of medium, or ethnicity … learning who are the major collectors, artists, and collections.” Soon, a conscious goal emerged, to assemble a representative, comprehensive, art collection of works on paper by African American artists.

A philosophy for the collection developed. The decision to focus on works on paper was social as well as economic as those works are often more affordable than paintings and are also easier to ship and store. The choice to collect works by African American artists fits Bob’s cultural heritage and both collectors’ desire to make a difference in our knowledge and understanding of American art.

As collectors, the Steeles were aware of the absence of African American art within the narrative of the larger canon of American art. They also knew that the number of collectors of African American art was limited and collections of African American art within mainstream institutions were limited as well.

The Steeles initially collected works on paper by African American artists such as Sam Gilliam, David C. Driskell, and Romare Bearden. By the 1980’s, Bob and Jean decided that works by Jacob Lawrence and Romare Bearden would anchor the collection. In 1987, they purchased Bearden’s ‘Homage to Mary Lou,’ a 1984 lithograph, and Lawrence Carpenter’s, 1977 offset lithograph. Since then, they added to the collection many important works by the two artists to the collection.

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Successions: Prints by African American Artists from the Jean and Robert Steele Collection will be on display from Thursday, February 2, 2012, through Friday, June 29, 2012 at the David C. Driskell Center for the Study of the Visual Arts and Culture of African Americans and the African Diaspora at the University of Maryland, College Park.

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