

# EXPLORE WITH THE COLUMBUS MUSEUM

## Making History: The Fight for Equal Justice

Born in Philadelphia, African American artist Reginald Gammon (1921-2005) found inspiration for many of his highly emotive paintings in the triumphs, trials, and forceful personalities that populate Black history in the United States. What is the first word that comes to your mind when you look at this painting? What do you see that makes you say that? Choose three adjectives to describe the women Gammon has depicted.

In the 1930s, nine Black teenagers were falsely accused of sexually assaulting two white women on a train near Scottsboro, AL. Within two weeks of the young men's arrest, all nine were tried and convicted by an all-white, all-male jury of the unfounded allegations. The speed of the trial combined with the youth of the defendants (13-19 years of age) and the severity of the sentencing (all but the youngest, Leroy Wright, received the death penalty) attracted the attention of several national organizations and sparked protests and demonstrations across the country.

In this painting, the artist depicts four of the "Scottsboro boys'" mothers who traveled to Washington, DC in 1934 to lobby for their sons' innocence. Look at the painting again. How does this information change your interpretation? How do Gammon's artistic choices serve to highlight the determination of the boys' advocates in securing justice?

In 1933 and again in 1935 (*Powell v. Alabama* and *Norris v. Alabama*), appeals to the Supreme Court found that the "Scottsboro boys" had been denied not only the right to counsel, but also the right to a fair trial as guaranteed by the Sixth Amendment. In the Jim Crow South, Black people were not allowed to serve on a jury, eliminating the possibility of assembling a fair and impartial jury. By exposing the inherent racism of the American legal system, the trial of the "Scottsboro boys" paved the way for the integration of juries and established a precedent for enforcing African Americans' right to adequate counsel under the equal protection clause of the 14<sup>th</sup> amendment.

Despite these small victories, the legal proceedings surrounding this case – which did not end until 2013 – represent a gross miscarriage of justice. To see a timeline of the trial and learn more about the "Scottsboro boys," visit <https://tinyurl.com/ywzvp9kv>.



Reginald Gammon, *Mothers (Scottsboro Mothers)*, 1970, Oil on canvas, 30"x22",  
Collection of The Columbus Museum

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## Making History: The Fight for Equal Justice (Continued)

**Did you know?** Jim Crow laws refer to state and local laws that legalized and enforced racial segregation in the southern United States. These laws began as early as 1865 after the ratification of the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment, which abolished slavery, and were enforced until as late as 1968.

Take a moment to reflect on this artwork and the case that it references. What is...

Something I know:

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Something I believe:

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Something I wonder:

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Revisit each prompt as you learn more about the Civil Rights Movement and the history that preceded it.

