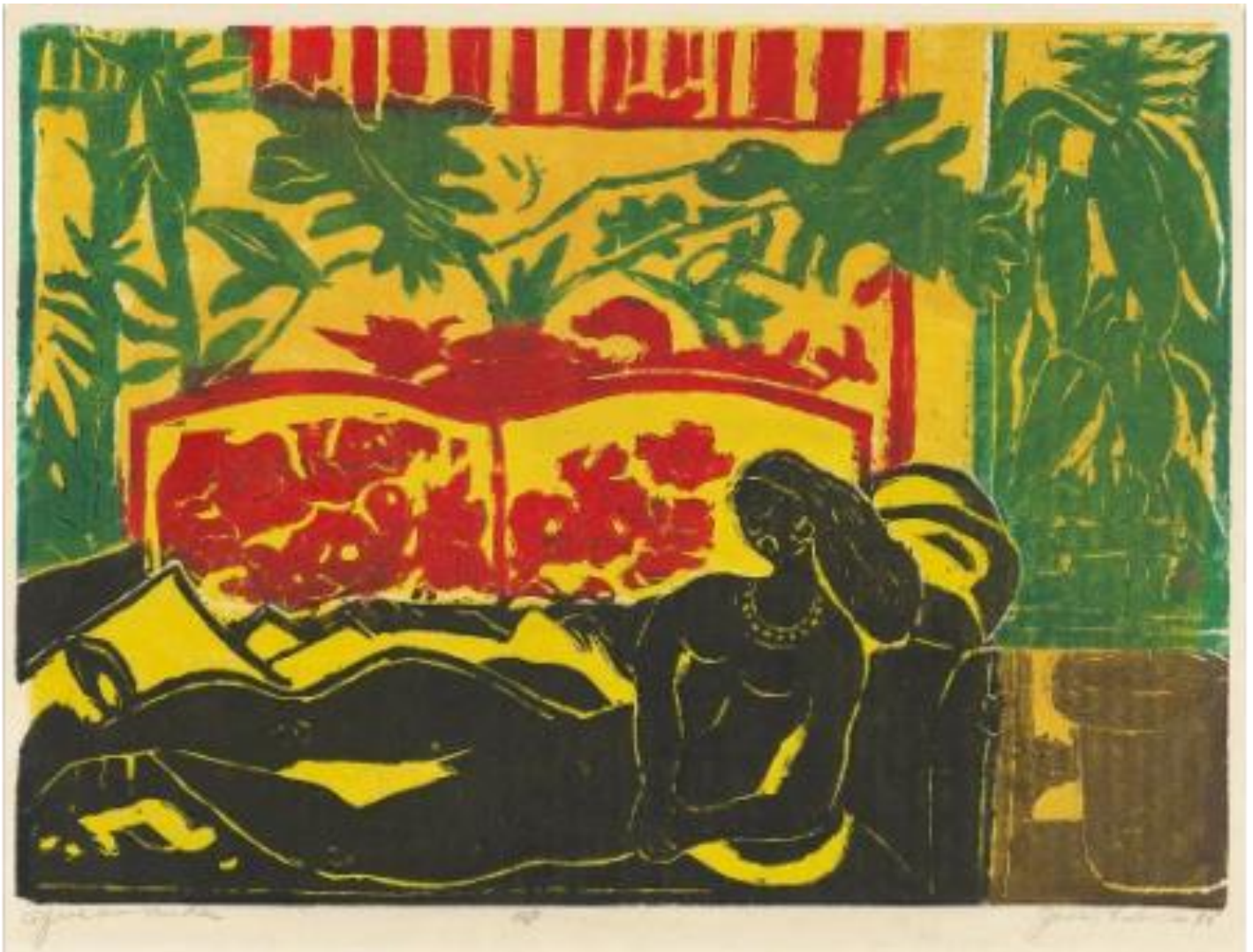


JAMES LESESNE WELLS



The woman in *African Nude*, wearing only a large necklace, reclines on an overstuffed settee. Her alluring position is similar to the pose found in classic images of odalisques—female slaves in the Ottoman Empire whose identities became sexualized and popularized during the nineteenth century. Yet unlike the seductive odalisque seen in Western art, whose gaze challenges by staring directly at the viewer, the nude in Wells' work, with eyes downcast, appears unhappily submissive and ill at ease amidst the oversize lush plants and gala colors of the background. The viewer is thus left unsettled, as if unwelcome despite the outwardly inviting scene.

James Lesesne Wells was born in Atlanta, Georgia, in 1902 and received BS and MS degrees from Columbia University, New York. He had a long career in printmaking, first participating in the Federal Arts Project, which encouraged the development of the art in the United States during the Great Depression, and then teaching at Howard University in Washington, DC, for almost four decades. Wells was active in the civil rights movement and often depicted the struggles of African-Americans in his work. *African Nude*, which Wells created late in life, reflects his printmaking skill, interest in traditional African aesthetics, and commitment to representing African-American history and experiences.