

“As for Beauford Delaney,” wrote black author **James Baldwin\*** (1924-1987) about the man depicted in this intense and vibrant self-portrait of 1944, “it escapes the general notice that he has comprehended, more totally perhaps than anyone in this century—and certainly more totally than anyone I know—the tremendous reality of the light which comes out of darkness.” [See slide 11]

Son of a Tennessee preacher, Beauford Delaney studied art in Boston before settling in New York in 1929. He arrived just as the Great Depression (1929-1939) eclipsed the fertile period of the **Harlem Renaissance**, also called the **New Negro Movement**. Delaney supported himself as a bellboy, then as a phone operator and janitor at the Whitney Museum of American Art, while beginning to produce a compelling and unconventional body of work.

His first pictures were portraits of friends or celebrated blacks. “I looked [**W.E.B. DuBois\***] up in the directory and went to his office,” Delaney once recalled. “He was very busy and his secretary came and spoke with me ... and I told her that, if Dr. DuBois didn’t mind, I would like to make a drawing of him. And she said: ‘You can make a drawing, but he won’t stop. Just go and make it.’ Which is what I did.”

Delaney’s work began to receive recognition—nurtured, in many instances, by those organizations spawned during the Harlem Renaissance to help black artists. He exhibited his portraits and drawings at the 135th Street branch of the New York Public Library, for instance, as well as at the **Harmon Foundation** shows. [See map page 23] In 1938, *Life* magazine featured a photo of Delaney and his work. By the early 1940s, Delaney’s unheated garret-studio on Greene Street in Greenwich Village was the meeting place for the avant-garde. Author Henry Miller (1891-1980) wrote an essay on Delaney’s work in 1945, and artist Georgia O’Keeffe (1887-1986) drew his portrait. “He was a very special person,” she remarked, “impossible to define.” Although he lived most of his life in poverty, his generosity of spirit often led him to give paintings to admirers. Oblivious to world events and, obviously, material comfort, his passion was his art. As Miller recalled: “The impression I carried away was one of being saturated in color and light. Poor in everything but pigment. With pigment he was lavish as a millionaire.”

Painted in 1944, the Art Institute’s *Self-Portrait* supports Miller’s statement. The colors are vibrant tones of red, blue, and yellow, freely and thickly applied. The artist wears his hallmark hat, painted a brilliant red, which is picked up again in the fragment of his sweater. Dominating these bright, thick tones is Delaney’s intense gaze. His eyes stare out, one piercing black pupil, one blank. Outlined in black, his features seem to be mere starting

## SLIDE ELEVEN

### BEAUFORD DELANEY

American, 1901-1979; worked in France from 1953

#### *Self-Portrait*, 1944

Oil on canvas (27 x 22 in.)

Restricted Gift of Alexander C. and Tellie S. Speyer Foundation; Samuel A. Marx Endowment, 1991.27



\* designates entry in Biographical Glossary

from Art Institute of Chicago  
African American Art teachers manual

## BEAUFORD DELANEY

points leading the artist toward his unique and imaginative vision. It's as if Delaney used these outlines to contain his images, which seem about to explode.

Following the tradition of Dutch artist Vincent van Gogh (1853-1890), Delaney uses color as a means of emotional expression. But whereas there is always a sense of anguished, nervous vitality in van Gogh's expressionist work, Delaney's paintings seem otherworldly, almost spiritual. As James Baldwin wrote: "If we stand before a Delaney canvas, we are standing, my friends, in the light: and, if in this light, which is both loving and merciless, we are able to confront ourselves, we are liberated into the perception that darkness is not the absence of light, but the negation of it."

By the late 1940s, Delaney was painting numerous street scenes drawn from the area around his home in lower Manhattan. [See figure 11] In *Can Fire in the Park*, 1946, street people warm themselves around a fire in a trash barrel whose roaring flames dance. Again, we see figures and shapes encased in black outlines, as if to keep them self-contained. And in some instances, they burst free. Trees sway, fire hydrants and lamp posts look almost like **totemic** figures, and the background becomes purely expressive pattern.

In some instances, Delaney dispensed entirely with representing the figure, painting thick swirls of brilliant color and pattern. Both in his representational and nonfigural work, Delaney's explosive brushwork, vibrant colors, and suggestive shapes and patterning reflect the bold new visual vocabulary of **Abstract Expressionism**, which had just begun to hold sway in New York.

In 1947 and 1948, Delaney's works received gallery exhibitions, both in New York and Philadelphia. Friends also obtained a fellowship for him to attend **Yaddo**, the artists' colony in Saratoga Springs, New York. Then, in the early 1950s, a benefactor gave Delaney his dream trip to Rome. But Delaney never made it past Paris, the artistic mecca that had attracted African American artists such as Henry Ossawa Tanner, since the nineteenth century. [See pages 17-21]

There, in the City of Lights, he met his old friend James Baldwin, took a room in a hotel on the Left Bank, and ended up living in Paris for the rest of his life. Pigment and light dominate a series of abstractions Delaney completed during the 1960s. He also continued painting powerfully expressive landscapes and portraits, often of noted figures in the arts, such as gallery director Darthea Speyer or French author **Andre Gide\*** (1869-1951). He received gallery exhibitions and several grants throughout the 1960s. In 1973, Darthea Speyer Gallery presented a comprehensive exhibition of Delaney's work.



But in his later portraits, some critics noticed a hint of melancholy. Life in the French capital had proven difficult. He failed to become fluent in French. Poverty was a constant threat. In 1978, The Studio Museum in Harlem held a major **retrospective** of Delaney's work, of which he was unaware. Suffering from Alzheimer's disease, he spent his final years in a French hospital. He died in 1979.

Although Delaney became legendary in France, the artist remained largely unknown in America. "A poor white artist is a miserable sight. But a poor black artist is apt to be a ridiculous figure as well," Henry Miller had written angrily in 1945. "And," he continued, "the better his work the more cold and indifferent the world becomes." Delaney's friend Baldwin was more sanguine: "Great art can only be created out of love, and ... no greater lover ever held a brush."

Figure 11.  
**Beauford Delaney.**  
*Can Fire in the Park,*  
1946. Oil on canvas. National  
Museum of American Art,  
Smithsonian Institution.  
Museum purchase.