



## Barthé, James Richmond (1901-1989)

by James Smalls

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James Richmond Barthé was a popular African-American sculptor associated with the Harlem Renaissance. He used his art as a means of working out internal conflicts related to race and sexuality.

Born on January 28, 1901, in Bay St. Louis, Mississippi, into a family of devout Roman Catholic Creoles, Barthé left home at sixteen to work as a houseboy for a wealthy and socially prominent New Orleans family.

In 1924, he moved to Chicago, where he took evening art classes at the Art Institute of Chicago and discovered his talent for sculpture. Only months before the stock market crash in 1929, Barthé moved to New York City. There he quickly made the acquaintance of many important artists, writers, patrons, and other intellectuals of the Harlem Renaissance.

Although he became renowned as a portraitist of celebrities in the worlds of art, theater, and dance, Barthé produced a variety of sculptures throughout his career. His three major themes are racial politics, religion, and eroticism.

Barthé's life and art were devoted to resolving internal conflicts resulting from the political pressures he felt as a black artist in New York, as a deeply spiritual person, and as a homosexual. His sculptures became the means through which he attempted to work out and work through these conflicts.

Although he has been labeled a New Negro Artist, Barthé did not fit in well with the New Negro philosophy as articulated by Alain Locke, the chief intellectual of the Harlem Renaissance. Barthé saw himself as set apart from those common black folk described so passionately in the writings of Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston. Unlike many of his artistic and literary contemporaries, Barthé was not overtly political or activist in his promotion of the race, though racial issues frequently surface in his work.

In 1931, Barthé's solo exhibition in a New York gallery brought him to the attention of critics. His work expresses a range of emotions and experiences, from lynching as a social reality for blacks to the ephemerality and eroticism of dance.

Artistically, Barthé preferred traditional styles and methods. He was particularly inspired by Western classical notions of beauty and Michelangelo's idealization of the male nude. He coupled this interest with Rodinesque expressive compositions and a fascination with primitivism.

These qualities are particularly noticeable in his many images of dancing men and women. For Barthé, dance was an inexhaustible theme; he even took dance lessons with Mary Radin of the Martha Graham



Richmond Barthé (top) expressed the political, racial, aesthetic, and erotic significance of the black male nude in works such as *Feral Benga* (above). Northwestern University Library Special Collections.

group soon after arriving in New York as a way to authenticate movement in his figures.

In his images of males and females engaged in dance Barthé confronts and attempts to resolve his preoccupations with race, spirituality, and homoerotic desire. Many of the dancing figures suggest the sculptor's ritualistic and erotic involvement with the single male or female subject in motion.

In 1937, Barthé exhibited six dance figures at the "Dance International 1900-1937" exhibition held at Rockefeller Center: *African Boy Dancing*; *Feral Benga*; *Kolombuan*; *The Lindy Hoppers*; *African Dancer*; and *Wetta*. The exhibition was a critical triumph for the artist and all of his works were immensely popular with the public, especially his statue of *Feral Benga*, which was widely publicized.

*African Dancer* is especially interesting for its androgynous features: a masculinized face combined with large breasts and narrow hips. By using modern dance as a theme for his sculptures, Barthé hoped to engage contemporary ideas of expression, primitivism, and modernity.

Barthé was unique among African-American artists during the Harlem Renaissance in that he was the only one to exploit fully the black male nude for its political, racial, aesthetic, and erotic significance, as in *Feral Benga* and *Stevedore*. His homoeroticism is expressed in both Western mythological themes and in notions of the Africanized primitive.

Although Barthé remained closeted all his life, he entered an established network of gay men and women soon after his arrival in Harlem in 1929. His penchant for homoerotic themes was encouraged by his friends in New York's gay and artistic communities, which stretched across barriers of race, gender, and class.

Among his black friends and associates were Wallace Thurman, Claude McKay, Langston Hughes, Jimmie Daniels, Countee Cullen, and Harold Jackman. His white allies included Carl Van Vechten, Noel Sullivan, Charles Cullen, Lincoln Kirstein, Paul Cadmus, and Jared French.

The majority of Barthé's patrons were white and gay. They included notables such as Winifred Ellerman, who published under the pseudonym Bryher, Van Vechten, Lyle Saxon, and Edgar Kaufmann, Jr. His most important African-American supporters included his friend and one-time lover, Richard Bruce Nugent, as well as Alain Locke.

## **Bibliography**

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## **About the Author**

**James Smalls** is Associate Professor of Art History and Theory at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County. He teaches and publishes on the interrelatedness of race, gender, and queer sexualities in nineteenth-century and modern art and in twentieth-century black visual culture.