



## Delaney, Beauford (1901-1979)

by Caryn E. Neumann

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The pressures of being black and gay in a racist and homophobic society may have ultimately robbed renowned American painter Beauford Delaney of his sanity.

Delaney was born in Knoxville, Tennessee on December 30, 1901 to a Methodist minister and a nurse. His younger brother Joseph (1904-1991) also became a noted artist. Perhaps the most significant early influence on Delaney was his mother, a formidable figure who had been born into slavery and who inculcated in her ten children both what she saw as the Christian virtues and a love for art and music.

After attending local schools in Knoxville, Beauford Delaney studied art at the Massachusetts Normal School in Boston. In 1929, he moved to Harlem just as the Harlem Renaissance succumbed to the Great Depression. Delaney then settled in a cold-water apartment in Greenwich Village in New York City.

Delaney typically produced pastel sketches, often portraits, which showed his fascination with the play of light and his love of the color yellow. His portrayals of W.E.B. DuBois, Marian Anderson, Duke Ellington, James Baldwin, and Ella Fitzgerald are considered classics.

Delaney exhibited at the 135th Street branch of the New York Public Library, the center of Harlem's cultural life. In 1936, he completed a Works Progress Administration mural in the Harlem Hospital. To make ends meet, Delaney also worked as a telephone operator and as a security guard at the Whitney Museum.

Delaney became part of a black gay circle with friends that included poet Countee Cullen. He was also friends with other artists and writers, such as Georgia O'Keeffe, who painted memorable portraits of him in 1940 and 1943, Alfred Stieglitz, Louis Armstrong, Henry Miller, and Willem DeKooning.

Author James Baldwin, whom Delaney painted several times from 1945 through the 1960s, found in Delaney a "spiritual father." The writer describes his initial meeting with Delaney in the introductory essay of *The Price of a Ticket* (1985). There Baldwin credits Delaney with being "the first walking, living proof, for me, that a black man could be an artist. In a warmer time, a less blasphemous place, he would have been recognized as my Master and I as his Pupil. He became, for me, an example of courage and integrity, humility and passion. An absolute integrity: I saw him shaken many times and I lived to see him broken but I never saw him bow."

Upon Delaney's death Baldwin remarked of him, "Perhaps I should say, flatly, what I believe--that he is a great painter, among the very greatest; but I do know that great art can only be created out of love, and that no greater lover has ever held a brush."

Despite Baldwin's description of Delaney as a great lover, however, the painter seems not to have had many sexually fulfilled love affairs. A deeply introverted and private person, Delaney formed no lasting romantic relationships.



Beauford Delaney.  
Photograph by Carl Van Vechten.  
Image courtesy Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.

Although biographer David Leeming reports that Delaney's first sexual encounter with another man occurred in the 1920s in a swan boat in Boston's Public Garden, another biographer doubts that the prudish artist would have engaged in semi-public sex.

Delaney never fit in with the macho abstract expressionists emerging in lower Manhattan's art scene, so he remained rather isolated as an artist even as he worked in a center of major artistic ferment.

Delaney also became the unwitting subject of a (perhaps unintentionally) racist portrayal, when Henry Miller depicted him as a noble savage in *The Amazing and Invariable Beauford Delaney* (1945, reprinted in *Air-Conditioned Nightmare*). In this well-intentioned and enthusiastic essay, Miller brought much needed attention to Delaney, but because the writer was intent on seeing Delaney as symbolic of the pure and simple African, Miller completely missed the painter's multidimensionality and complexity as well as his passionate interest in opera and classical sculpture.

In 1953, just as the center of the art world was shifting to New York City, Delaney left for Europe with the intention of settling there. On the ship to Europe, African-American painter and French resident Herbert Gentry urged Delaney to consider living in Paris. After visiting the City of Light, Delaney spent the remainder of his life in France. Like other expatriate gay men, he could often be found with friends in the Café Flore.

Delaney's style matured in France. He continued to paint portraits but also moved away from representational painting toward pure abstraction. In Delaney's art, there is never anything expressly gay, though his homosexuality undoubtedly affected his art in many ways.

Delaney experienced his first major mental breakdown in Greece in 1960. He suffered from alcoholism and schizophrenia. Baldwin believed that Delaney's difficulties as a black man, a gay man, and an artist simply overwhelmed him.

By the 1970s, Delaney had become unable to care for himself. He died, alone and impoverished, in a Paris mental hospital on March 25, 1979.

Now celebrated as a significant American modernist painter, whose portraits, landscapes, and abstractions are noted for their brilliance and technical complexity, Delaney has found posthumously the acclaim that eluded him in life. His work and life have been the subject of several major exhibitions, including "Beauford Delaney: From New York to Paris," which was mounted at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts in 2004 and will travel to other American museums in 2005 and 2006.

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