



1945

Oil on canvas

22 x 18 inches (55.9 x 45.7 cm)

BEAUFORD DELANEY
American

125th Anniversary Acquisition. Purchased with funds contributed by The Daniel W. Dietrich Foundation in memory of Joseph C. Bailey and with a grant from The Judith Rothschild Foundation, 1998, 1998-3-1

LET'S LOOK

Look closely and try to figure out who this person is. What adjectives would you use to describe his personality?

Which parts of the painting look flat? Three-dimensional? Point to some shadows, highlights, outlines, and parallel lines.

Name the different colors used to paint this face. Are these colors you see on real faces?

LET'S LOOK AGAIN

Why did Delaney choose to paint a full-face, close-up view of Baldwin?

Why did he use such bright colors, thick paint, and swirling brushstrokes?

Do you think this portrait is a realistic representation of Baldwin or an expression of the artist's feelings about him? Why?

PORTRAIT OF JAMES BALDWIN

Who could this person be? The face almost fills the entire picture and the wide-open eyes are looking right at us. The expression is puzzling—is he feeling sad, or just quiet? Is he alert, or a bit anxious? Is he lost in thought, or about to smile or say something? This is a portrait of the African American writer James Baldwin (1924–1987), who was famous for his eloquence and passion on the subject of race in American during the late 1950s and early 1960s. Baldwin was only twenty-one years old and unknown when Delaney, who was then forty-four, painted this portrait.

Perhaps Delaney chose to paint a close-up view of his young friend because Baldwin's compelling intellect and dynamic personality were already so striking. By applying thick paint (called impasto) in bright, contrasting colors with swirling, rhythmic brushstrokes, Delaney expressed his strong feelings of kinship and love for Baldwin. Our eyes are drawn to Baldwin's penetrating gaze and intent expression by the bright highlights on his forehead, nose, cheeks, lower lip, and neck. The combination of primary colors (red, blue, and yellow) gives the painting a feeling of energy. The head, eyes, mouth, neck, and shoulders are boldly outlined in black and surrounded by a pink glow, like an aura or halo. Many short brushstrokes create a sense of movement throughout the painting. Because the face is not perfectly symmetrical (exactly the same on both the right and left sides), our eyes tend to shift back and forth—is one ear higher than the other?

The intense bond between Delaney and Baldwin was very much like that between a father and son. Although Delaney was twenty-three years older, they had much in common. Both were sons of southern preachers, and were brought up in families that struggled to make ends meet and moved frequently. Both were excellent students who received help and encouragement from their public school teachers

and communities. Their relationship began when Baldwin was a high school senior and lasted for thirty-eight years. Both men were immersed in the vibrant cultural scenes in New York City (before and during World War II) and in Paris (from the early 1950s through the 1970s), where they found wealthy supporters and friends who were prominent artists, musicians, and writers. Finally, because both men were African American, they experienced discrimination, especially in America. In later years, Baldwin spoke of Delaney as his “principal witness” and his “spiritual father,” and said he owed him “a debt that can never be repaid.”

ABOUT THIS ARTIST

Beauford Delaney was born in Knoxville, Tennessee, in 1901, the eighth child of a domestic servant and a Methodist Episcopal minister and barber. He was named for Beaufort, South Carolina, where his parents came from. He graduated with honors from segregated schools and dreamed of becoming a singer, but a white artist and teacher named Lloyd Branson encouraged him to go to a Northern city to study art. In Boston, Delaney worked as a janitor and took figure-drawing classes at several different art schools. He visited art museums, attended concerts, and became friends with black artists and poets as well as wealthy art lovers.

In 1929, Delaney moved to Harlem in New York City. He soon became friends with members of a movement called the Harlem Renaissance—the emergence of African American writing, music, and art that was based there. Delaney also developed close relationships with many white artists and art collectors in Greenwich Village, where he lived for nearly twenty-three years. At first he made pastel and painted portraits of his friends as well as singers, writers, and jazz musicians he admired. Then his work expanded to include street scenes and abstractions—done with bright colors and thickly applied paint. Although his work was exhibited frequently in New York and other cities, Delaney struggled to make a living from his art and worked part-time as a custodian and art teacher.

In 1953, Delaney was able to travel to Rome, and on the way there, he met up with his friend James Baldwin in Paris and decided to stay. After settling on the Left Bank—an area in Paris famous for its artists and cultural life—he found people who were interested in buying his paintings. Delaney never became fluent in French, however, and suffered from poverty and alcoholism. After Baldwin helped him move to an apartment in the suburbs with a large window and garden, close to other Americans, Delaney’s paintings became lighter and lost their dark outlines. Gradually, his memory became impaired—perhaps due to Alzheimer’s disease—until he was hospitalized. He died in Paris in 1979.

Delaney did not achieve wide recognition during his lifetime and art critics often stereotyped him as an eccentric black artist who used bright colors and “African rhythms.” However, Delaney resisted being labeled a Negro artist, or even an American artist, and in fact his expressive portraits, bold cityscapes, and luminous abstractions were at the forefront of international art trends.

ABOUT JAMES BALDWIN (1927–1987)

Born and raised in Harlem, New York, James Baldwin is known for his impassioned novels, essays, and plays describing race relations in America. His early interest in writing was encouraged by one of his teachers, Countee Cullen, a leading poet of the movement called the Harlem Renaissance. After high school Baldwin lived in the Greenwich Village section of New York, where he worked in a restaurant and wrote. In 1948 he moved to France and produced a succession of best-selling novels—*Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953), *Giovanni’s Room* (1956), and *Another Country* (1962). When racial violence broke out in the United States in the late 1950s, Baldwin decided to visit the South for the first time. He became passionately involved with the Civil Rights movement after hearing Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., preach about nonviolence. Baldwin’s vivid descriptions of the daily terrors and triumphs of ordinary African Americans in Harlem and the South were published first as magazine articles, then collected in books. In 1963 Baldwin was featured on the cover of *Time* magazine and he was invited to the home of Attorney General Robert Kennedy to discuss possible solutions to the racial violence erupting throughout the South. Baldwin played a pivotal role as an outraged spokesperson, committed to peaceful approaches to America’s racial struggles. He continued to advocate for the civil rights of African Americans for several decades with lecture tours, teaching, and more novels, essays, and plays. He died at his home in southern France at the age of 63.

CONNECT AND COMPARE

- Compare a black-and-white photograph of James Baldwin with the painted portrait by Beauford Delaney. Describe how Baldwin’s personality is similar and different in the two pictures.
- Beauford Delaney adored jazz and he went to jazz clubs whenever he could. He painted portraits of musicians and tried to express the essence of jazz, which he felt was a great African American achievement. Listen to several jazz recordings, then choose one that you think expresses the mood of Delaney’s portrait of James Baldwin.

- Study this portrait and imagine what James Baldwin is thinking. Write an interior monologue from his point of view.

RELATED ART PROJECT

Work in pairs to make full-face, close-up portraits of each other with oil pastels. Make sure the top of the head touches the top of the paper and the face fills most of the space. What colors best express the personality of the person you are drawing? Try layering and mixing colors. Consider including dark outlines, pastel highlights, and parallel lines.

This painting is included in African American Artists: 1859 to the Present, a set of teaching posters and resource book produced by the Division of Education and made possible by generous grants from Delphi Financial Group and Reliance Standard Life Insurance Company.