

Press Release



January 2015

Brooklyn Museum Acquires Important African American Modernist Painting by Beauford Delaney

The Brooklyn Museum has purchased a powerful painting by the twentieth-century African American modernist artist Beauford Delaney. *Untitled (Fang, Crow, and Fruit)*, 1945—an oil-on-canvas still life measuring 25 by 30 inches—resonates deeply with other major midcentury American works in the collection by artists including Stuart Davis and Marsden Hartley, and it significantly advances the Museum's recent focus on acquiring works by African American artists that derive formal or thematic inspiration from traditional African art. The acquisition marks the fifth anniversary of the Brooklyn Museum Fund for African American Art, a collecting initiative focusing on works by African American artists created before the mid-twentieth century.

Beauford Delaney was born in Knoxville, Tennessee, to Samuel Delaney, a minister, and his wife, Delia. In about 1916, Delaney's artistic talents were recognized by the Knoxville artist Lloyd Branson, who provided lessons in exchange for Delaney's services as a porter. With Branson's encouragement and support, he left Knoxville for Boston in 1923 to pursue his artistic career, and enrolled in classes at the Massachusetts Normal School, as well as at the Copley Society and South Boston School of Art.

When Delaney moved to New York City in November 1929, he found a niche among Greenwich Village's bohemian avant-garde, who embraced liberal attitudes concerning race and sexual preference. He made a meager living on portrait work, finding patrons among the performers who flocked to Billy Pierce's Dance Studio to learn the latest African American vernacular dances. While he spent time in the studios and nightspots frequented by the leaders of the Harlem Renaissance, which was in full swing by the early 1930s, Delaney remained most closely tied to the Village, working in a series of spartan studio spaces and taking the neighborhood's streets and parks as a primary subject.

Untitled (Fang, Crow, and Fruit) dates from Delaney's last decade in New York (before he immigrated to France, his place of residence from 1953 until his death in 1979), when his style evolved from a broad naturalism to a distinctly more commanding expressionism. He was at work in an unheated Greene Street loft at the time, and he had developed a close friendship with the writer James Baldwin, for whom he was a deeply influential early mentor. Both were seeking empowerment as black artists and gay men. Inspired

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and sustained artistically by a connection to African culture and art, they found support in the writings of Alain Locke, who from the mid-1920s had encouraged young black artists to derive formal inspiration from African sculpture as European modernists had done. They were attentive to Locke's altered message of the late 1930s, when he urged artists to seek a more direct relationship with their African ancestry and identity by understanding the long-held centrality of art in African life.

In *Untitled (Fang, Crow, and Fruit)*, Delaney arranged the composition as if representing an offering—the bowl of brilliant-yellow fruit—placed before a Fang reliquary figure from Cameroon that was in fact a well-known object that had been published in an important German volume, *Negerplastik*, in 1920. A bird, perhaps a spirit symbol, hovers over the fruit, while the black calligraphic forms in the background may suggest a shelter and tree in an African setting. The power of this work grows from the electric intensity of Delaney's palette and the vibration of forms deriving from his highly animated brushwork. The bowl almost appears to spin, and the figure—suggested with deft marks—to rock.

Delaney's very thick and lively application of paint was influenced by his interactions with Stuart Davis, with whom he had developed a close friendship and shared equal passions for painting and new jazz. Davis's own more decoratively abstracted compositions would exert an even greater influence on Delaney's increasingly flattened designs from 1946 until 1953. Marsden Hartley's paintings, which were showcased in a large exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in the winter of 1944/45, are certain to have been influential on Delaney's expressionist facture and iconic subject matter as well.

In addition to resonating with important works of American modernism in Brooklyn's collection, *Untitled (Fang, Crow, and Fruit)* further strengthens the Museum's ability to represent the vital dialogue in which African American artists engaged with traditional African art.

The painting's original owner was Emanuel Redfield, a noted civil liberties attorney and counsel to the New York chapter of the Artists Equity Association. Delaney may have presented Redfield with the work as a form of payment as early as 1945, the year of its completion, when Redfield's services were engaged to challenge a landlord who had denied access to apartments on St. Mark's Place that Baldwin and their circle of friends had planned to use as a shared living and studio space.

With the purchase of Beauford Delaney's *Untitled (Fang, Crow, and Fruit)*, a complex and vivid narrative enters the orbit of the Brooklyn Museum's *American Identities* galleries, where it will go on view in February 2015. Joining important works on view by Eldzier Cortor, Sargent Johnson, and John Biggers, this painting will allow a deeper exploration of how references to African forms and themes in these works enacted a claiming of heritage and identity, in contrast to the references to African art in Eurocentric modernist works that embody distance, difference, and the "other." The painting additionally offers a fresh opportunity to study the exposure of African art in New York during the interwar years, particularly in the context of the Museum's important African holdings and their exhibition from the 1920s forward.

The work was acquired for the Brooklyn Museum by Dr. Teresa A. Carbone, Andrew W. Mellon Curator of American Art, Brooklyn Museum, who has played a leadership role in the creation of the African American purchase fund. The purchase was also made possible by A. Augustus Healy Fund and Ella C. Woodward Memorial Fund.

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GENERAL INFORMATION

Admission:

Contribution \$16; students with valid I.D. and seniors \$10. Ages 19 and under FREE. Group tours or visits must be arranged in advance by calling extension 234.

Directions:

Subway: Seventh Avenue express (2 or 3) to Eastern Parkway/Brooklyn Museum stop; Lexington Avenue express (4 or 5) to Nevins Street, cross platform and transfer to the 2 or 3. Bus: B41, B69, B48. On-site parking available.

Museum Hours:

Wednesday and Friday, 11 a.m. to 6 p.m.; Thursday 11 a.m. to 10 p.m.; Saturday and Sunday, 11 a.m. to 6 p.m.; first Saturday of each month (except September), 11 a.m. to 11 p.m. Closed Monday, Tuesday, Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Year's Day.