The Life, Art, and Times of Joseph Delaney, 1904–1991

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Frederick C. Moffatt

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For Anne, Jonathan, and Lee

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Introduction

In the last century, between the First and Second World Wars, thousands of African Americans who were raised in largely rural areas of the southeastern and central southern United States migrated to large northern cities. Many sought to escape the violence and social degradation that attended racial segregation in their home areas; but not a few also wanted to free themselves from the emotional dependency and cultural depravation that family and church had imposed on them. With perhaps much the same trepidation felt by European émigrés who in the same years embarked for America, southern blacks struck out for Minneapolis, Cincinnati, Detroit, Pittsburgh, Cleveland, Philadelphia, Chicago, and New York as if for a foreign country. Some were adventurers; others sought employment in industry, education, and business; and others settled for whatever menial employment they could find. A few, however, were determined to gain professional standings in the arts—in dance, theater, and music; in studio fine arts, mural painting, or photography; in the literary arts and art criticism; or in the teaching of art or in gallery work as curators or administrators. Some aspirants elected to continue their odysseys in Mexico or in Europe, especially in Paris, which at the time doted on the African American musician, dancer-showman, sculptor, and painter. There was no particular urgency for the African American poet, playwright, novelist, or the "self-taught," "folk," or "primitive" artist to acquire academic training; still, with few educational opportunities available to them in the South, a significant number of studio artists entered racially integrated inner-city art

schools and academies. While the Great Depression only worsened the South's prevailing social, economic, and cultural malaise, the northern black person stood to gain unexpected financial and educational dividends from local and federal relief agencies, notably the WPA, the star of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's "New Deal" administration. While the city promised pedagogic resources, economic opportunities, social networking, and a modicum of racial tolerance, only one urban center, New York City, bestowed special recognition on its resident black artists. Chicago, Philadelphia, Boston, Washington, D.C., and Los Angeles retained regional importance, but the borough of Manhattan, bolstered by its vast museum, gallery, and publication infrastructure, continued to bask in its century-long reputation as the nation's undisputed art capital. Also much in New York's favor was the fact that its spectacular milieu of throbbing energy, wondrous architecture, and seething heterogeneous population had become America's ultimate urban motif.

This book focuses on the art, life experiences, and writings of one such southern African American migrant, Joseph Delaney. Although arriving in New York in 1930, a decade after the full flowering of the Harlem Renaissance, Delaney, in paintings that lampooned that city's past and its present condition, kept pace with a leading echelon of African American painters and graphic artists over a fifty-year period. Jacob Lawrence, Romare Bearden, Horace Pippin, and Aaron Douglas emerged as the group's critical favorites, but the middle tier of painters and graphic artists with which Delaney is associated includes such veteran practitioners as Palmer Hayden, Ellis Wilson, Lois Mailou Jones, Hale A. Woodruff, Norman Lewis, Hughie Lee-Smith, Rex Gorleigh, Dox Thrash, Archibald Motley, Jr., Albert Wells, James L. Wells, Charles Alston, Charles White, Eldzier Corter, William H. Johnson, and, until his departure for Paris in 1953, Beauford Delaney, Joseph's older brother. Approximately half of these artists were originally from the South: Wilson was born in Kentucky; William Johnson in Florence, South Carolina; Hayden in Virginia's Tidewater region; Corter in Richmond, Virginia; James Wells in Atlanta; Alston, Albert Wells, and Bearden in North Carolina; and Lee-Smith in Georgia. The sons of a Methodist preacher, the Delaney brothers grew up in East Tennessee. When he was eighteen, Joseph angrily renounced his family, and by 1925 he had resettled in Chicago. A year after he arrived in New York, he enrolled in the Art Students League (ASL) of New York and thereafter conscientiously applied what he had learned of figurative art to painting portraits and to a succession of paintings and drawings that presented fanciful interpretations of city life. In 1986, five years before his death, Joseph Delaney was appointed visiting artist by the University of Ten-

nessee at Knoxville, and thus would live out his final years in his verdant birthplace.

Among the tools commonly employed to recover and disseminate a history of art is the study of the individual in preference to the crowd. Assisted by archival photographs and illustrations that reproduce artworks, the art monograph documents, describes, interprets and otherwise analyzes the content, narrative, and formal characteristics—the particular use of line, shape, color, and commanding design—and the overall style of a select body of work that credibly represents an artist's lifework. Most art historians assume that causal relationships exist between art and life; thus, parentage, youthful experiences, places of residence, educational indoctrination, if any, mentorship, patronage, critical reviews of artwork, the detected stylistic presence of other artists in the individual's work, and personal and historical milestones are all considered to have important supportive roles to play in the art history monograph. So it is reasoned that the broader cultural, political, and social trends that define the era or age in which the artist lived, what philosopher G. W. F. Hegel termed the Zeitgeist, have enormous influence in ultimately determining the character of that artist's oeuvre. When carried to an extreme, such reasoning can have an overbearing effect on a text. The art historian Donald Preziosi once wrote that his field of study "exhorts the art historian to construct the text of history so as to render it internally consistent and coherent . . . this exhortation extends to the larger chronological picture as much as to the individual vita or to the individual art work."[1]

Utilizing the advantages of the ample time and space it commands, the text of a monograph can dwell on such seemingly out-of-the-way matters as the racial incident that inspired William H. Johnson to paint his *Moon over Harlem* (1943); or Lois Mailou Jones's chance meeting with the African American scholar-critic Alain Locke after her return from Paris in 1938; the young Jacob Lawrence's experiments with block prints in classes taught by Sarah West under the WPA Federal Art Project Workshop in Harlem in 1933; or on an account of Archibald J. Motley Jr.'s conservative Catholic upbringing in Englewood on Chicago's South Side, in the opening years of the last century.[2] In its defining description of an oeuvre, the monograph can thus focus on seeming trivia, as well as upon more dramatic and sharply etched events in its mission of presenting and analyzing a whole body of work. An artist biography does not require its subject to speak directly to the reader. But when the occasion arises, the monograph can usefully coordinate the signification of the written word and the visual object. Joseph Delaney wrote extensively, often with humor and colloquial verve, about his travels,

the people he met, and the things he read about; sometimes about how he came to produce a particular painting, about everyday life in the neighborhoods he knew, and passionately about the things he liked and disliked that were occurring in the art world and, beyond it, in the areas of politics and social events. He composed short stories that combined fiction with historically verifiable facts. The family biography and the successive autobiographies he composed in his middle years happily augment our understanding of, and appreciation for, the measurable storehouse of "painted words" Delaney has left us.

Although it tends to obscure minute differences between individual artists, the art history survey, on the other hand, assists the historian and critic by setting forth a canon, an initial hierarchal relationship between supposed leaders and followers that is gradually amended over time. Delaney entered the canon of contemporary black artists in the very first surveys of African American art to be published, Alain Locke's *The Negro in Art* (1940) and James A. Porter's *Modern Negro Art* (1943). His position was reaffirmed in such later compendiums as Elsa H. Fine's *The Afro-American Artist* (1973), David C. Driskell's *Two Centuries of Black American Art* (1976), and Romare Bearden and Harry Henderson's ambitious *A History of African-American Artists: From 1792 to the Present* (1993). The earliest compilations introduced a multiracial readership to the little-known fact that a viable African American art tradition indeed existed and illustrated, however ineffectively, samples of historic and contemporary work. Labeled by name, title, and date and displayed in rows in separate page inserts, these often ruinous half-tone photographs resembled rows of merit badges that alerted the reader-viewer to a particular artist's high standing among his or her peers. Like other later twentieth-century survey texts, Driskell's—it appeared in a catalog accompanying a large group exhibition at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art—advanced several critical points, the principal one being the author's contention that a truly "American" art was incompatible with the racially delimited art that had been advocated by white supremacists and Black Power separatists. For their part Bearden and Henderson first criticized such white authors of American art history surveys as Barbara Novak, Edgar P. Richardson, Oliver Larkin, Milton Brown, and Barbara Rose for completely neglecting blacks and then proceeded to commend their featured artists for having resisted prejudice, unfair professional practices, and their own understandably low esteem.[3]

The white authors' omissions did not necessarily result from overt racism. A scarcity of quality educational resources, perennial unemployment, and the long denial of civil rights had over time undermined

African Americans' own desire to found an ethnic art legacy. Despite the substantial archival holdings established by the William E. Harmon Foundation at the Library of Congress, the (Arthur) Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture at the New York Public Library, the Frederick Douglass Institute of the Museum of African Art at Washington, D.C., and the combined resources of Clark-Atlanta University in Atlanta, Fisk University in Nashville, and Howard University in Washington D.C., woeful information gaps severely impeded Driskell's and Bearden-Henderson's research efforts. Driskell, a painter who formerly chaired Fisk's Department of Art, regretted that so many works by African Americans had vanished, that too many existing works lacked documentation, and that art texts and updated dictionaries on his subject remained in too short supply. The Bearden-Henderson team affirmed that the blight affected the records of even recently produced black art: simple vital statistics went unrecorded; letters, diaries, and dealers' names appear to have vanished into thin air. In his frustration Bearden admitted that "documentary work provides special problems—all artists are careless, but more so African Americans."[4] Delaney's perspicacity in bequeathing much of his art and most of his papers to a public institution—the University of Tennessee—has helped ensure that a similar fate would not befall the resources that have been so crucial to this writing. The greatest single threat was neutralized long ago when despite mounting commercial and professional discouragement, Delaney continued to paint and write. Having decided to persist in his endeavors no matter what, he cared enough about his body of work to preserve it and allow the public to have access to it after his demise.

The black artist of the twentieth century either believed the markers of race were essential to an authentic art or were the hallmarks of its destruction. Fifty years before the Black Arts movement arose, even the mild and conciliatory Booker T. Washington, when referring to those light-skinned members of his race who attempted to pass as whites, urged African Americans not to desert their racial brothers. But, like his mentor Driskell, Delaney was adamant that racial considerations be kept out of discussions about art. In this regard, it is worth quoting the disclaimer that opens Driskell's catalog essay:

> Work by black American artists has frequently been discussed as though it were a form of expression separate from that produced by artists of the majority culture. That this approach has been readily sanctioned comes as no surprise, for most literature on black American artists reflects sociological patterns that have been fostered by

> the tradition of classifying people and their culture according to race. Yet the black artist has neither wanted nor accepted this critical isolation. . . . The black artist is no different from any other in his struggle to express his own individual sensitivity to order and form and at the same time relate to the cultural patterns of time and place in which he lives. In this sense art, though seldom allowed to perform its function without critical analyses, knows no racial boundaries. It is ultimately a universal language of form, a visual dialogue about man's cultural history that can be read and understood without regard to the color of the artist.

Similarly, after Hale Woodruff was praised for being the "first black American to teach at a major (white) Northern university," beginning at New York University in 1946, that painter–print maker asserted: "We must transcend the racial approach to this problem . . . that is to say in a political sense. Forget the fact that I was a *first* in getting a job as a professor in a so-called white university. . . . First and foremost I am an artist like a plumber is a *plumber,* a mechanic is a *mechanic,* a singer is a *singer,* a designer is a *designer,* a teacher is a *teacher,* and so on."[5]

Despite the thinking of Delaney, Woodruff, Driskell, Hayden, Wilson, Motley, Alston, Raymond Saunders, and many other painters who were active in the middle to late years of the twentieth century, race and color, like sticky flypaper, have nonetheless continued to attach themselves to every artwork or critical viewpoint that even remotely touches on a particular artist's or art group's African ancestry. As the survey texts that first established the black canon began to give way to attractively designed and handsomely illustrated thematic histories of black art, like those produced by Sharon Patton, Richard Powell, and Michael Harris, the reexamination of racial stereotypes and the refutation of formerly sacrosanct definitions of racial Otherness, Delaney would have been unhappy to learn, have increased in intensity and scope. One recent color theme exhibit held in New York City, "The Color Line," which opened at the Jack Shainman Gallery in Chelsea in 2007, led its audience through a dismaying obstacle course of social considerations: "race as defined by skin color, race as biological fiction, race as social fact, race as an art theme, and race as an aesthetic link between cultures." But as Harris recognized, "to suggest that race is no longer visualized, meaningful, or problematic, seems incorrect and fanciful . . . as Cornel West has aptly phrased it, 'race matters.'" In this statement Harris was reacting to the one recent group exhibition that

ironically displayed black artists for the purpose of protesting the usual political and cultural connotations of "black art." "Free Style," organized in 2001 by Thelma Golden when she directed the Studio Museum in Harlem, sought to unburden her exhibitors from having to live up to their "blackness." Coining the phrase "post black art" in her catalog essay, Golden, in a half-serious, half tongue-in-cheek, manner, sought to redefine racial identity by having the nonprogrammatic assembly of works and installations serve to "undefine," or disassemble, the conventional paradigms of blackness.[6] Had he lived to see "Free Style," Delaney would have liked it no better than "The Color Line" exhibition, yet no doubt would have derived from it the pleasure of knowing he had already been practicing as a "post-black" New York artist many years before Golden's new stars had been born.

Delaney once used the slang term *cagey* to describe his favorite ASL teacher, the painter Thomas Hart Benton (1889–1975). The same adjective readily applies to his own art. When first seen, Delaney's raucous narratives, like the cartoon imagery that distantly inspired them, seem charmingly straightforward, singularly uncomplicated, even if, at first glance, they appeared somewhat too boastful, audacious, and reliant on forced gaiety. Unhurried study indicates something else. Where least expected, a curious reserve begins making itself felt in the work; a reflective nuance that connects with Delaney's abiding moral concerns becomes ever more apparent. At the same time the narratives themselves begin bristling with clues that beg to be uncovered. With the assist of the internet's magic-carpet access to urban history, one can see the New York paintings as encapsulated historical moments, not of the photographic kind, but of a Proustian "felt time" translation of the incidents Delaney remembered or directly experienced.[7] With Delaney, as with Proust, and all modernists, memory and experience are indistinguishable mental aptitudes.

Doubtless Delaney would question any number of interpretive responses to his works. With his usual politeness, he might deny he had this or that event in mind when he painted the work in question. Perhaps he might offer that it was our imagination, not his, that "solved" the puzzle presented by a painting. Although admittedly of crucial importance, an artist's utterance about his or her work need not be considered the last word on its signification.

The art biography typically begins at the birth of an artist-subject and, in Aristotelian fashion, moves in regulated chronological sequence to his or her death, although some, like Charles De Tolnay's classic *Michelangelo* (1953), begin in reverse order to accommodate a consideration of the individual's genealogy. An art biography will usually encompass

a discussion of dated or datable artworks in an early-to-late progression. It will be divided into chapters that correspond with the progressive time-place positioning of the artist-subject. In place of the conventional biographical narrative, a monograph may present an anthology of thematic topics that are collected together like separate articles. This book generally obeys Aristotle's chronological dictum. Two early chapters center on Delaney's birth and youth; a last one discusses his return to Knoxville and death. The fifty-year period that marks his New York residency branches into multiple diachronic themes. The initial New York chapters take up Delaney's affiliations with art institutions, the WPA, and exhibition groups; another section deals with his activities through the war years; and several other subheadings apportion his later artistic production to generic classifications. In a few instances, a work drawn from Delaney's later life provides an opportunity for illustrating an event that occurred in his youth. Stepping around the dual logic of chronology and causality, it is sometimes more convenient to discuss the reminiscing works within the context of his youth, instead of along with other paintings that bear similar dates. The fact that relatively few of Delaney's paintings and drawings are dated has made it easier to overlook the strict bounds of chronology. In treating the artist's most enterprising leitmotif, the New York City parade, a late chapter examines paintings and drawings that were produced over a forty-year period.

The beginning chapter, however, more forcefully bends the chronological convention. It engages Delaney at midcareer in an extended discussion of his inestimable painting, *V.J. Day, Times Square.* Dealing with the painting's form, content, style, symbolism, and with patronage issues, as well as with the circumstances that attended its creation, this chapter functions as a secondary introduction. The B-A-C approach adopted here, as opposed to the A-B-C chronological structure of the sequential narrative, calls attention to Delaney's most significant achievement without delay, while providing the reader-viewer with the useful reminder that this painting exactly divides the subject's career. Following the opening chapter, the text reverts to Delaney's childhood and thereafter to the above-described period sections. The diligent chronologist might object that the startling abruptness of chapter 1 violates the sacrosanct laws of cause and effect and, worse, threatens the consistency and organic coherency that all valid biographical narratives must embrace. Such beliefs have of course proven to be just as arbitrary as any other kind of compositional formula a writer may choose. Modern playwrights, classical and modern music composers, storytellers, poets, psychologists, philosophers, philologists, novelists, and directors of cinema and videocasts have long accepted the B-A-C, C-B-A, or other

compositional readjustments as routine tools of the repertoire.[8] It is, after all the Western world's first great narrative masterpiece, *The Iliad,* that begins, as the ancient poet Horace coined the phrase, in medias res, with Achilles' rage, rather than with the gathering of the armies, and fortunately so.