

The temporary home of The Frick Collection

Barkley L. Hendricks: Portraits at the Frick

Keenly Awaited Exhibition to Focus on Influential American Artist

September 21, 2023, through January 7, 2024



New York (July 17, 2023)—Since opening in 1935, The Frick Collection has inspired generations of artists who have engaged with the complex legacies and enduring importance of Old Master painting. Barkley L. Hendricks was one such artist, and the Frick—with its iconic portraits by Rembrandt, Bronzino, Van Dyck, and others—was one of Hendricks’s favorite museums. On view this fall at Frick Madison, *Barkley L. Hendricks: Portraits at the Frick* presents fourteen early works by this pioneering American artist who, beginning in the late 1960s, revolutionized contemporary portraiture by uniting portraits of Black figures with traditions of European painting. His work has inspired some of the most prominent artists of today, including Derrick Adams, Mickalene Thomas, and Kehinde Wiley. Frick Madison is a particularly appropriate venue for this show, as it was in the Breuer building (then the home of the Whitney Museum of American Art) that Hendricks first showed his art in a New York City museum exhibition, in 1981.

Barkley L. Hendricks: Portraits at the Frick, which will display paintings drawn from both public and private collections, is organized by the Frick’s Curator Aimee Ng and Consulting Curator Antwaun Sargent. The accompanying catalogue is authored by Ng and Sargent, with a foreword by Thelma Golden and contributions by Adams, Thomas, and Wiley, along with Hilton Als, Nick Cave, Awol Erizku, Rashid Johnson, and Fahamu Pecou. The Frick will present a roster of educational programs to complement the show.



Comments Ng, “The Frick offers stirring encounters with figures painted centuries ago. As our temporary display at Frick Madison has shown, these works seen in a new light can engage visitors so differently outside of the Frick mansion, in the Brutalist setting of the Breuer building. Here, many of our visitors are new to the Frick, a revelation that has prompted reflection on who the Frick serves, has served, and will continue to serve. This project—the first major museum exhibition and catalogue to focus solely on Hendricks’s early period of portraiture—allows us to consider connections the Frick has made with artists since it became a public museum in 1935. Hendricks’s astonishing portraits of predominantly Black figures, not represented in the Frick’s historic paintings yet who, with their self-assured style, appear right at home among them, grants unprecedented opportunities to celebrate and explore the Frick’s collection, Hendricks’s groundbreaking innovations, and the bridges between them.”

Adds Sargent, “When Aimee and I first began speaking about the Frick and its place in today’s world, I suggested an exhibition on Barkley L. Hendricks—obviously because of his interest in historic art as he developed his own style of portraiture of Black subjects, but also because the quality, dignity, and visual impact of his paintings are what I would think

Henry Clay Frick might be drawn to if he were collecting now. The catalogue accompanying the exhibition is an exciting way to highlight and reflect on Hendricks's own legacies, how he has inspired generations of artists and designers and still does today. Presenting Hendricks's art at a storied institution like the Frick pays due tribute to the artist's historic significance, and it also honors the evolving role of the Frick in modern American culture."

ABOUT BARKLEY L. HENDRICKS



Born in Philadelphia, Hendricks (1945–2017) attended the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts and earned an MFA from Yale University. He would go on to teach at Connecticut College from 1972 until 2010. Throughout his career, Hendricks embraced diverse influences from many sources, including music (particularly jazz) and African and Indigenous art. He explored various themes and genres—from basketball paintings to landscapes—and created paintings in numerous media as well as drawings, collages, and sculptures. He was an equally accomplished and prolific photographer, often basing his painted portraits on photos taken in his studio or on the street. In the spring of 1966, during his third year at the Pennsylvania Academy, Hendricks was awarded a scholarship for travel in Europe, which proved to be a turning point in his artistic development. Visiting museums across the continent over three months, he was struck by “how limited the representation of black figures has been in Western art history, and how few of those

depicted have been truly humanizing or personalized portraits.” He returned to Philadelphia with “a head full of inspirations” and began to produce a series of portraits in modes and materials inspired by the Old Masters he had seen in Europe. *Barkley L. Hendricks: Portraits at the Frick* focuses on these works.

Hendricks's approach contrasted to the prevailing artistic culture surrounding Black subjects in the late 1960s and '70s, during which the Black Arts Movement sought to expose and overcome the legacies of European art and instead highlight the struggle and strength of Black communities. Of the art of his early career, Hendricks remarked:

How many black people...were part of any kind of visual information that didn't deal with what I call the misery of my peeps? You know, you can always find visual information that deals with the hardship, slavery, and all the rest of it. I'm not denying any of this by any stretch of the imagination, but I'm trying to...address a situation that's not a part of that.

The impact of European art on Hendricks's painting was direct, though his response was decidedly not pure imitation. Byzantine icons and gold-ground Italian Renaissance paintings inspired the groundbreaking *Lawdy Mama*, a portrait of his cousin Kathy Williams, for which he learned the centuries-old and painstaking technique of applying gold leaf. The painting's rounded top—crafted by Hendricks himself—echoes the geometry of Renaissance art and architecture and eloquently frames the sitter's afro-as-halo. The title, taken from lyrics by Nina Simone, also evokes the traditional Christian “Lord” and “Mother.” Together, these elements transmute what might otherwise be seen simply as a modern portrait of one of Hendricks's relatives into a profound meditation on past and present, with his characteristic touch of humor.

Hendricks often set his figures against a monochromatic expanse of color, an almost otherworldly space as meditative as the shimmering gold grounds that signaled divinity. Recalling the Christian tradition of portraying the enthroned Virgin Mary against a Cloth of Honor, Hendricks’s backgrounds—especially those featuring intense color, such as *Blood (Donald Formey)*—evoke the brilliant backgrounds in Renaissance portraits like Bronzino’s *Lodovico Capponi*, one of Hendricks’s favorite paintings at the Frick. At the same time, they resonate with the Modernist flatness of Piet Mondrian, of Minimalism and Pop Art, and of color field painting. He executed the backgrounds in matte acrylics and painted his figures in oil, resulting in a contrast that can only be fully appreciated in person: The varnished faces and bodies glisten in the light, as if on a separate plane from the background.



The exhibition at Frick Madison brings together a group of Hendricks’s so-called “limited palette” paintings. In his white-on-white works in particular, the figures’ brown skin tones and dark-hued accessories become abstract shapes when viewed from afar, while up close the variation within the dark tones and the color white becomes evident. At Frick Madison, several of these limited palette works will be displayed near portraits by James McNeill Whistler. The two artists, separated by about a century, explore similar relationships between color, shape, and surface. In *Symphony in Flesh Colour and Pink: Portrait of Mrs. Frances Leyland*, for example, Whistler explored the construction of figure and background using a selection of hues (among which “flesh colour” refers to that of his white European subject). In his own portraiture, Hendricks highlighted the range of his subjects’ skin tones against different background colors in order to “address the beauty and variety of complexion colors that we call Black.”

Hendricks sought to make his painted figures approachable and human. In discussing works like *Lawdy Mama*, for example, he acknowledged the inspiration of early Renaissance painting, at the same time regarding the gold grounds simply as “shiny things” with universal appeal, regardless of one’s knowledge of art history. He also requested that his paintings be hung relatively low so that they might meet his viewers eye to eye.

Hendricks brilliantly transformed his stylistic borrowings and historical emulations into something new. This exhibition connects two remote periods of art and history—that of early modern Europe and the United States of the late 1960s to early 1980s—inviting a range of perspectives that may find themselves at odds. At the same time, his work encourages audiences to see Old Master paintings in ways they may never have otherwise, bridging, through his art, varied histories, geographies, and distances between people.

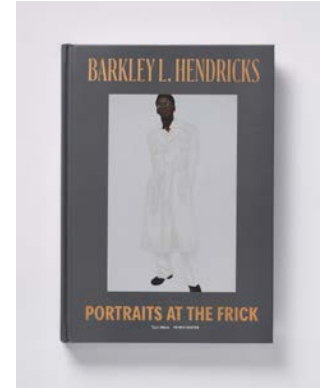


FREE COMMUNITY EVENING THIS FALL AMONG PROGRAM OFFERINGS

The Frick’s next free seasonal Gray-Krehbiel Open Night will feature programming revolving around the exhibition. Held on Friday, September 29, from 5:00 to 9:00 p.m., the event will welcome visitors to enjoy after-hours access to Frick Madison’s galleries along with the reading room of the Frick Art Reference Library. A variety of talks will be presented throughout the evening, along with music and sketching. The event is free to all with online registration. ASL interpretation and Assistive Listening Devices are also provided at all the talks. Information about the series is available at frick.org/opennights. Other program information will be posted [on our programs page](#).

CATALOGUE WELCOMES REFLECTIONS AND MANY PERSPECTIVES ON THE ARTIST

The catalogue that accompanies *Barkley L. Hendricks: Portraits at the Frick* will be published in September 2023 by The Frick Collection in association with Rizzoli Electa. With a foreword by Thelma Golden, Director and Chief Curator of the Studio Museum in Harlem, and essays by exhibition organizers Aimee Ng and Antwaun Sargent, this richly illustrated publication investigates Hendricks's relationship to the Old Masters and to the Frick, which he visited frequently over a period of four decades. Featuring numerous previously unpublished archival photographs, the book also considers Hendricks's legacy through contributions by eight prominent artists and cultural figures who were influenced by his practice: Derrick Adams, Hilton Als, Nick Cave, Awol Erizku, Rashid Johnson, Fahamu Pecou, Mickalene Thomas, and Kehinde Wiley.



The hardcover volume of 160 pages (\$50.00, member price \$40.00) features 120 color illustrations. The book may be pre-ordered online through the Frick's Museum Shop at shop.frick.org, by emailing sales@frick.org, or by calling 212.547.6849. It will also be available for purchase onsite this fall.

EXHIBITION SUPPORT

Barkley L. Hendricks: Portraits at the Frick is made possible with support from the Ford Foundation. Additional funding is generously provided by Margot and Jerry Bogert, Bain Capital and The Crimson Lion / Lavine Family Foundation, Denise Littlefield Sobel, Ayesha Bulchandani, Agnes Gund, the Cheng-Harrell Institute for Global Affairs, Jane Richards, Suzanne Deal Booth, Gini and Randall Barbato, Barbara G. Fleischman, Michael and Jane Horvitz, Crystal McCrary McGuire and Raymond J. McGuire, Arielle Patrick, John F. Wieland Jr., Bailey Foote, Codring James Jr., Sterling McDavid and Carey Dorman, and an anonymous donor.

ABOUT THE FRICK COLLECTION AND FRICK MADISON

The historic buildings of The Frick Collection are currently closed for renovation and enhancement, their first comprehensive upgrade since the 1930s. For the duration of the renovation project, the collections of the museum and library remain accessible to the public at Frick Madison, the Marcel Breuer–designed building at 945 Madison Avenue that was once the home of the Whitney Museum of American Art and, most recently, The Met Breuer. Now in its final year, the temporary residency ensures that the public can continue to enjoy the Frick's masterpieces, while also giving the museum a unique opportunity to reimagine its presentation of paintings, sculptures, and decorative arts within a completely different context.

Honoring the institution's architectural legacy and unique character, the renovation plan designed by Selldorf Architects will provide unprecedented access to the original 1914 residence of Henry Clay Frick, while preserving the intimate visitor experience and beloved galleries for which the Frick is known. Conceived to address pressing institutional and programmatic needs, the plan will create new spaces for permanent collection display and special exhibitions, conservation, education, and public programs, while improving visitor amenities and overall accessibility.

Images: Barkley L. Hendricks (1945–2017), *Lawdy Mama*, 1969, oil and gold leaf on canvas, 53 3/4 x 36 1/4 in. (136.5 x 92.1 cm), Studio Museum in Harlem, gift of Stuart Liebman, in memory of Joseph B. Liebman. Artwork © Barkley L. Hendricks, courtesy of the Estate of Barkley L. Hendricks and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York; Frick Curator Aimee Ng with Consulting Curator Antwaun Sargent at Frick Madison. Photo: George Koelle; Barkley L. Hendricks, *Self-Portrait with Black Hat*, 1980–2013, digital C-print, 27 3/4 x 18 3/4 in. (70.49 x 47.63 cm), Jack Shainman Gallery, New York. Photo © Barkley L. Hendricks, courtesy of the Estate of Barkley L. Hendricks and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York; Barkley L. Hendricks, *Blood (Donald Formey)*, 1975, oil and acrylic on canvas, 72 x 50 1/2 in. (182.9 x 128.3 cm), collection of Jimmy Iovine and Liberty Ross. Artwork © Barkley L. Hendricks, courtesy of the Estate of Barkley L. Hendricks and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York; Barkley L. Hendricks, *Steve*, 1976, oil, acrylic, and magna on linen canvas, 72 x 48 in. (182.9 x 121.9 cm), Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, purchase and gift with funds from the Arthur M. Bullowa Bequest by exchange, the Jack E. Chachkes Endowed Purchase Fund, and the Wilfred P. and Rose J. Cohen Purchase Fund. Artwork © Barkley L. Hendricks, courtesy of the Estate of Barkley L. Hendricks and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York, photo © Whitney Museum of American Art / Licensed by Scala / Art Resource, NY; Barkley L. Hendricks, *Woody*, 1973, oil and acrylic on canvas, 66 x 84 in. (167.6 x 213.4 cm), Baz Family Collection. Artwork © Barkley L. Hendricks, courtesy of the Estate of Barkley L. Hendricks and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York; Catalogue cover. Photo: Joseph Coscia Jr.

INTERACT

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BASIC INFORMATION

Website: frick.org

Building project: frickfuture.org

Bloomberg Connects app: frick.org/app

Frick Madison visitor address: 945 Madison Avenue at 75th Street, New York, NY 10021

Museum hours: Thursday through Sunday, 10:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m.; closed Monday through Wednesday. See website for holiday schedule.

Admission: Timed tickets are strongly recommended and may be purchased online. \$22 general public; \$17 seniors and visitors with disabilities; \$12 students. Free admission is granted to visitors ages 10–17. Admission is always free for members. Pay-what-you-wish admission is offered Thursdays from 4:00 to 6:00 p.m.

Please note: Children under ten are not admitted to the museum.

COVID-19/health and safety policies: frick.org/visit/guidelines

Ticket purchase link: frick.org/tickets. For questions: admissions@frick.org

Group reservations: For questions: grouppreservations@frick.org

Public programs: A calendar of online, virtual, and video events is available on our website.

Shop: Open during museum hours as well as online daily.

Refreshments: A light menu, offered by The SisterYard, is available on the lower level during museum hours.

Subway: #6 local to 77th Street station; #Q to 72nd Street station; **Bus:** M1, M2, M3, and M4 southbound on Fifth Avenue to 75th Street and northbound on Madison Avenue to 74th Street

Museum mailing address: 1 East 70th Street, near Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10021

Photography: Allowed only in the Frick Madison Lobby.

Reading room: Access is offered by appointment Tuesday through Sunday, 10:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. For further information, visit frick.org/tickets.

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For further press information, please contact us at communications@frick.org.

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