



Barthe: A Life in Sculpture

Margaret Rose Vendryes

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Richmond Barthé (1901-1989) was the first modern African American sculptor to achieve real critical success. His accessible naturalism led to unprecedented celebrity for an artist during the 1930s and 1940s. After four years of academic training at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Barthé reaped the benefits of the 1920s New Negro Arts Renaissance. He also endured difficulties as a gay, Roman Catholic, Creole sculptor working during the nation's post-World War II era. He gave his black subjects in particular an intensity and sensuality that attracted important European American patrons and the press.

Much of Barthé's biography is recorded here for the first time in tandem with analyses and interpretations of his sculpture. Born to Creole parents in Bay St. Louis, Mississippi, Barthé's art brought him out of poverty. At the height of his fame, he was often criticized for not talking about injustices African Americans faced. He expected his art to speak not only for itself, but also for him. He fled the United States for an expatriate's life in Jamaica only to learn that, as an artist and a black man, he could not be accepted on his own terms, and there was no such thing as a perfect home. *Barthé: A Life in Sculpture* reveals the breadth of Barthé's oeuvre through readings of his figurative masterworks that attest to accomplishments in a life lived well beyond race.

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