

Benny Andrews



Benny with Students from Lusher Elementary, 2006

Born: 1930 Plainview, GA
Died: 2006 New York, NY

Benny Andrews was born in 1930, in rural Georgia. Benny was the son of a sharecropper and was one of 10 children, who all worked in the cotton fields to help support the family, attending school only sporadically. Benny was of mixed race heritage - Scottish, Cherokee and African American. His mother Viola instilled in her ten children the importance of education, religion, and freedom of expression; his father George "The Dot Man", a self-taught artist, fueled their creativity with his drawings and illustrations. In 1948 he became the first member of his family to graduate from high school. After serving in the U.S. Air Force, he

studied at the Art Institute of Chicago on the G.I. Bill. He was trained as an abstract expressionist, but at night went to jazz clubs to draw. While his natural talent was soon recognized, he was excluded from numerous organizations and the exhibitions they organized for being African American. In the 1960's and 70's he led protests against galleries and museums that did not exhibit the work of women and African Americans.

Benny Andrew was a writer, an activist, and a self-described "painter of people" who often drew upon his own experiences to reflect the changing nature of life in America, especially the South. For example, impacted by the Jim Crow laws when denied admission to art school at the University of Georgia because of his mixed race heritage, he depicted the end of segregation in the ironically pastoral piece *Death of the Crow*.

Two kinds of influence coexist in Andrews's art. The first is an exuberant regionalism that considers the lives of the poor, also seen in the work of Thomas Hart Benton. The second is a narrative impulse realized by important modernists artists such as Romare Bearden and Jacob Lawrence who invested their renderings of black life with dignity and pathos. While it is possible to see Andrews as working in the vein of storytelling, his art also speaks to the ongoing project of exploring what it means to be American. Andrews, who sees himself as an inheritor of several cultures, has said, "It bothers me not being seen as a complicated individual. It's much easier [for people to typecast me] as regional or representational or Southern or black."

Before his death in late 2006, he had become a significant and important artist in America, a skilled collagist, painter, printmaker, sculptor and illustrator. He believed "in standing up" and fought to integrate the art world, prevent cruelty to children, and bring art to audiences not usually reached, such as prisoners. From 1982-1984 he served as the Director of Visual Arts for the National Endowment for the Arts. He was especially interested in helping young people enter the visual art world and worked with New Orleans school children after Hurricane Katrina. On November 10, 2006, Benny Andrews died at the age of 75 from cancer.



Benny Andrews, *Grandmother's Dinner*, oil and collage, 1992