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## HENDRICKS, Barkley Leonnard

**Barkley L. Hendricks** (April 16, 1945 – April 18, 2017) was a contemporary American painter who made pioneering contributions to Black portraiture and conceptualism. While he worked in a variety of media and genres throughout his career (from photography to landscape painting), Hendricks' best known work took the form of life-sized painted oil portraits of Black Americans.

### Early life

Born on April 16, 1945 in the North Philadelphia neighborhood of Tioga, Barkley Leonnard Hendricks was the eldest surviving child of Ruby Powell Hendricks and Barkley Herbert Hendricks. His parents moved to Philadelphia from Halifax County, Virginia during the Great Migration when large numbers of African-Americans moved out of the rural Southern United States. Hendricks attended Simon Gratz High School and graduated in 1963. He attended Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts (PAFA). After graduating PAFA in 1967, Hendricks decided to enlist in the New Jersey National Guard and found work as an arts and crafts teacher with the Philadelphia Department of Recreation. In 1970, he began attending Yale University and graduated in 1972 with both a bachelor's and master's degree. At Yale, he studied with Bernard Chaet, Lester Johnson, Gabor Peterdi, Robert Reed, and the photographer Walker Evans.

### Career

Hendricks was Professor of Studio Art at Connecticut College, where he taught drawing, illustration, oil and watercolor painting, and photography, from 1972 until his retirement in 2010, when he became Professor Emeritus. In the mid-1960s while touring Europe, he fell in love with the portrait style of artists like van Dyck and Velázquez. In his visits to the museums and churches of Britain, Italy, Spain and the Netherlands, he found his own race was absent from Western art, leaving a void that troubled him. As the Black Power movement gained momentum, Hendricks set about to change what he saw in Europe by correcting the balance, in life-size portraits of friends, relatives and strangers, encountered on the street, that communicated a new assertiveness and pride among Black Americans. In these portraits, he attempted to imbue a proud, dignified presence upon his subjects. He frequently painted Black Americans against monochrome interpretations of urban northeastern American backdrops.

Barkley L. Hendricks strikes a pose in front of "Bahsir" (Robert Gowens), 1975. Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University. Photo by Duke Photography.



Hendricks' work is considered unique in its marriage of American realism and post-modernism. Although Hendricks did not pose his subjects as celebrities, victims, or protesters, the subjects depicted in his works were often the voices of under-represented Black people of the 1960s and 1970s.

Hendricks even stood alongside his subjects and featured himself in works. In 1969, he painted one of his first portraits, *Lawdy Mama*, which depicts a young woman (his second cousin) in the style of a Byzantine icon with gold leaf surrounding her modernly-dressed figure and Angela Davis style afro on an arched canvas. Hendricks said the portraits were about people he knew, and were only political because of the culture of the time.

In the 1970s, he produced a series of portraits of young black men, usually placed against monochromatic backdrops, that captured their self-assurance and confident sense of style. In 1974, Hendricks painted *What's Going On*, one of his best-known portraits, named after Marvin Gaye's single *What's Going On*. In 1977, Hendricks' work appeared in the exhibition, "Four Young Realists," at ACA Gallery in New York City. The show received critical acclaim, including the response of the prominent art critic, Hilton Kramer, whose review focused largely on Hendricks' work. Kramer praised Hendricks, but referred to his style using racist terms such as "slick," and called him "brilliantly endowed." Hendricks painted two self-portraits in response: the first was *Brilliantly Endowed (Self portrait)*, 1977, a full-frontal nude self-portrait in which he is wearing only sports socks and sneakers, some jewelry, glasses and a white leather applejack hat. In the second, *Slick*, 1977, also a frontal view, Hendricks depicts himself wearing a kufi cap, a symbol of his African American identity, and wearing a white suit.

Hendricks' work is included in a number of major museum collections, including the National Gallery of Art, the National Portrait Gallery, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the Studio Museum in Harlem, the Tate Modern, and the National Endowment for the Arts. He stopped painting portraits from 1984 to 2002 to concentrate on other practices like landscape painting and photography, including portraits of jazz musicians, such as Miles Davis and Dexter Gordon. In 1995, his work was the primary revelation in the Whitney Museum of American Art's traveling exhibition, *Black Male*, which focused on the concept of black masculinity, and also launched the career of Kehinde Wiley. Anna Arabindan-Kesson of the Tate Modern has offered a critical evaluation of Wiley's debt to Hendricks.

Hendricks' paintings *Icon for My Man Superman*, 1969, and *Brilliantly Endowed (Self portrait)*, 1977, have been especially influential works. Both have inspired tributes from prominent artists. Fahamu Pecou's *Nunna My Heros: After Barkley Hendricks' 'Icon for My Man Superman,' 1969*, 2011, explicitly pays homage to Hendricks, whom he has notably credited as an inspiration: "It was truly one of the first experiences where I saw myself reflected, not just culturally, but in terms of my own visual aesthetics and approach to art." Similarly, Rashid Johnson's *Self-Portrait in Homage to Barkley Hendricks*, 2005, reenacted *Brilliantly Endowed* for the camera, almost 30 years later.

In 1984, Hendricks turned away from painted portraiture during a period he referred to as the "Renaissance," during the years of the Ronald Reagan presidency. For the next 18 years, he concentrated primarily on landscape painting and photography, but returned to painting portraits for the last 15 years of his life. His return to portraiture came with his painting of Nigerian Afrobeat legend, Fela Kuti, which he painted for the "Black President" exhibition at the New Museum of Contemporary Art in 2003. Hendricks' first career painting retrospective, titled *Barkley L. Hendricks: Birth of the Cool*, with works dating from 1964 to 2008, was organized by Trevor Schoonmaker at the Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University in spring 2008, then traveled to the Studio Museum in Harlem, the Santa Monica Museum of Art, the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, and the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston. Hendricks's work was featured on the cover of the April 2009 issue of Artforum Magazine, with an extensive review of *Barkley L. Hendricks: Birth of the Cool*. Hendricks' work was included in the 2015 exhibition *We Speak: Black Artists in Philadelphia, 1920s-1970s* at the Woodmere Art Museum. His work, *New Orleans Niggah*, 1973, hung in the National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, DC, when it opened in 2016. In 2017 Hendricks's portraits were included in *Prospect.4: The Lotus in Spite of the Swamp*, installed in the Great Hall of the New Orleans Museum of Art. It was the largest and most significant presentation of his portraits since *Birth of the Cool*, with works ranging from 1970 to 2016. In early 2018, MassArt's Bakalar & Paine Galleries mounted the exhibition, "Legacy of the Cool: A Tribute to Barkley L. Hendricks," which featured 24 artists who had been inspired by Hendricks. "Legacy of the Cool" included work by such notable artists as Rashid Johnson, Amy Sherald, Hank Willis Thomas, Thomashi Jackson, Toyin Ojih Odutola, Delphine Diallo, and Nona Faustine. Hendricks was represented by Jack Shainman Gallery in New York City.

In May 2019, Sotheby's Auction House sold Hendricks' *Yocks*, 1975, for \$3.72 million, nearly triple the amount it had sold for in May 2017, at \$942,500, then a record for the artist.