



## 65: Robert Gwathmey *Non-Fiction* (1943)

Michael Kammen

Born in Richmond, Virginia, Robert Gwathmey never lost his Tidewater drawl and colloquialisms. Married for fifty-three years to a North Carolinian he met in Philadelphia, where they both studied at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Gwathmey came of age in the South when segregation and the economic oppression of African Americans remained a harsh reality. Gwathmey learned about the debilitating life of sharecroppers first-hand in 1944 when he lived on a farm in Rocky Mount, North Carolina, and worked alongside tenant farmers in the sun-blazed fields where he became familiar with the daily hardships of their lives. His deep and abiding concern for social justice, however, dated back more than a decade to his days as an art teacher and political activist in Philadelphia and Pittsburgh.<sup>1</sup>

By the end of the 1930s Gwathmey had destroyed most of what he painted during the previous decade because it seemed so derivative from the work of his teachers. He then began to develop his own distinctive style: deliberately two-dimensional and flat, using vivid (often clashing) colors, ignoring chiaroscuro on the grounds that the flatness of his "native region" tended to obscure such shadows and perspectives, and preferring light and dark contrasting color planes for his backgrounds. The artists he most admired served him well, and they are all reflected in *Non-Fiction*. The influence of sharp social satire from Honoré Daumier is plain to see. The bold (and controversial) inclination of Jean-François Millet to highlight peasant life in nineteenth-century France made it more acceptable for Gwathmey to focus his attention on humble sharecroppers and their families. Picasso's bold colors and love of harlequin costumes with their diamond-shaped patterns had particular appeal for the emerging American artist.

At least six years prior to the profound experience of working on that Tar Heel farm, Gwathmey decided to depict African American life as he had observed it in both town and country, and he did so with figural realism rather than romanticization. He knew full well that long days and years in the fields caused debilitating arthritis and rheumatism, and he knew that when both parents worked extended hours in the fields, children were obliged to help look after younger siblings. Although some of the images he painted during the 1940s were caustic satires combined with caricature, like *Non-Fiction*, more often than not he simply painted "colored people" (as they were called then) at home, mending clothes while singing songs, gathering for church on Sundays or mingling "in town" on a sociable Saturday afternoon.

In terms of productivity, finding his own metier, and achieving national recognition, 1943 was quite clearly Gwathmey's breakthrough year. He had recently found a sympathetic dealer in New York, Herman Baron of the ACA Gallery (American Contemporary Artists), who was happy to feature his work and provide some financial support. Two of the works Gwathmey painted that year won prizes. His *Rural Home Front*, a color silkscreen (a technique in which he was a pioneer), received first prize in the Artists for Victory exhibition that was part of the National Graphic Arts Competition sponsored by a wartime association of leading arts organizations. His large and panoramic *Hoeing* won the \$700 second prize at an exhibition, *Painting in the United States*, sponsored by the Carnegie Institute of Technology in Pittsburgh, which swiftly purchased the painting for its permanent collection. It featured a larger-than-life black man leaning on his hoe and wiping the sweat from his forehead. To his right there are poor white workers taking a break while black laborers to his left continue to toil at various rural tasks.

Robert Gwathmey,

1903–1988

*Non-Fiction*, 1943

Oil on canvas, 29 x 24 in.

Marion Stratton Gould Fund,

51.7

Art ©Estate of Robert

Gwathmey/

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In the lower right hand corner of *Hoeing* a young black girl holds a child on her hip. Those same two figures become prominent rather than incidental in *Non-Fiction*. The barbed wire, Gwathmey's customary symbol of segregation and entrapment in the vicious cycle of sharecropping, surrounds the grown man in *Hoeing* but entangles both the girl and the painting-within-a-painting in *Non-Fiction*. The stark contrast between the ghostly minstrel and the two stoic children make the image compelling. The headless figure at which we gaze is unreal, whereas the girl staring so intently at us is all too real. His race is unclear because he wears gloves the color of patinated copper; whereas her race is entirely evident. We know that only a few years earlier the Gwathmeyes had accidentally come upon an all-black minstrel show in rural North Carolina, and we know from a lithograph by Thomas Hart Benton that whites were still attending rural minstrel shows as recently as the mid-1930s. Racial caricaturing was very much alive in the 1930s and 1940s. The most popular radio program of the era was "Amos 'n' Andy," in which two white writer-performers fascinated the nation with comic narratives mocking the lives of blacks who had recently migrated from rural fields to urban factories.

Robert Gwathmey,  
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*Non-Fiction* (detail), 1943  
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Gwathmey's composition of *Non-Fiction* is exceedingly careful—he always remained a meticulously deliberate designer. One might ordinarily assume that it was painted as a preliminary study that eventually became one small part of the more ambitious *Hoeing*. But Gwathmey did not work that way. Most of the time if he liked one or two figures in a large and complex painting he had completed, he would then isolate them and make a separate smaller version, or in the case of *Non-Fiction* they could become the basis for a variant image. He may very well have worked on both pictures simultaneously; but the most likely pattern for this artist would have been *Hoeing* first, followed directly by *Non-Fiction* because he felt pleased with the image and had a "follow-up" idea that he wished to execute.

The baby rests on the girl's left hip while the banjo rests on the minstrel's left hip. The minstrel actually holds an unreal banjo that has no strings. Their absence only serves to highlight the sinuous snare created by the cruel barbed wire entangling the girl, by calling up ideas of black music and mocking humor so prominent in American popular culture ever since the 1840s, when minstrel shows and "blacking up" became a national craze. Above all, the intensity of the girl's gaze contrasts with the disturbing absence of the minstrel's gaze. We are seeing through him though not beyond him, while she is staring so intently at us. "His" unreality makes her presence all the more poignant and stressful.

Why the upturned horseshoe below the minstrel's big bow-tie? As it happens, Robert Gwathmey loved to play horseshoes. (So his grim narrative of the South's black past thereby embodies a highly personal aside, as so many provocative paintings covertly do.) Ultimately, for purposes of this iconic image, we see an unsubtle symbol of good luck ironically placed. Neither the children nor the minstrel are fictional. The cut-out minstrel confronts us absent a face but with merely a sur(face) instead—thereby exposing the superficiality of its entertainment genre. The American minstrel show was a historical reality. Gwathmey's allusive "fiction" can be found in what the storied minstrel show had done by distorting African American realities into ludicrous travesties.

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