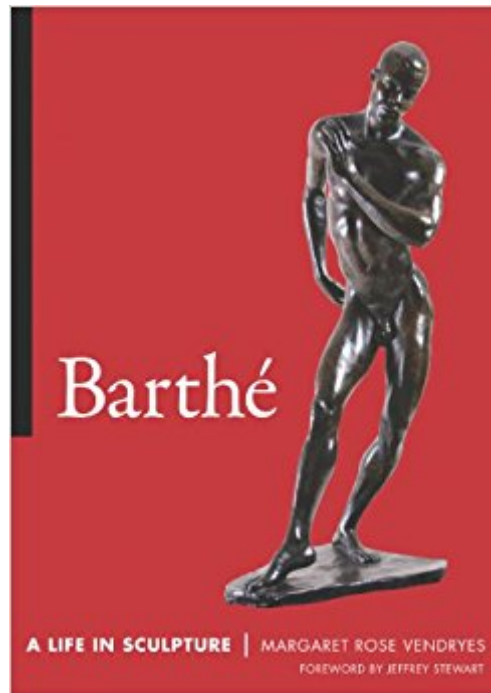




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# Barthé: A Life In Sculpture



## Synopsis

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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## Customer Reviews

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1930s and 1940s. After four years of academic training at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Barthélemy 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 Barthélemy'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, Barthélemy'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. Barthélemy: A Life in Sculpture reveals the breadth of Barthélemy's oeuvre through readings of his figurative masterworks that attest to accomplishments in a life lived well beyond race.

A celebration of the acclaimed African American modern sculptor

Barthe's Inner Music used to be displayed at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. When I researched the piece I got very little information that helped me understand the sensuality of his work beyond his love for classical images and his association with the Harmon Foundation. I intuited that Barthe might have been attracted on a deeper level to the beauty of the male body but 15 years ago I only found one article that dared state this artist was gay. Margaret Rose Vendryes has done a great service in this amazing book putting the man and the artist in a much broader context. Not only has she satisfied my curiosity about my attraction to this one piece of art but the book is so well written I loved reading every page.

Barthe was a sculptor that so many more people need to know. I am so pleased that this biographical work was made. The author stated that Barthe tried to write an autobiography, but abandoned it. This text is incredibly important for those wanting to read about famous African-American gays. Barthe strongly identified as a Roman Catholic and as a gay man, so the gay and lesbian Christian community may enjoy this book as well. Regardless of your identity, you may be interested in how Barthe inhabited multiple worlds. He intended to be a painter, but fell into sculpture. He wanted to be seen as more than a "Negro artist," but acknowledged how that description opened doors for him. He loved classical European sculpture, but produced many Black

subjects from around the African diaspora. Although he never made the dream trip to Africa, he moved to Jamaica and was surprised that his race didn't make him "one of us" with Jamaican locals. Most importantly, many art critics and historians viewed Barthe only via his race, but this book does impressive work in bringing up sexual orientation issues as well. This is a wonderful and needed intersectional text. Many biographies are gushy and lack critical analysis, but this work does not error in that fashion. The author takes Barthe to task for some of the boring sculptures he made. Also, she revealed factual shortcomings. Barthe was bad with money, didn't keep a good catalogue of his oeuvre, etc. Many of his planned sculptures never got made or erected due to forces beyond his control. Like Black lesbian sculptor Edmonia Lewis, many of Barthe's sculptures were lost or destroyed. Like Black gay painter Beauford Delaney, Barthe suffered from mental illness problems. This work says Barthe knew Black gay poet Owen Dodson, but I don't remember hearing Barthe's name mentioned in Dodson's biography. Like Dodson, Barthe knew and socialized with many gay men, Black and white. However, unlike Dodson, there is more known about Barthe's love life, though it too may have been scant and frustrating. Like Black, gay leader Bayard Rustin, Barthe's stance toward civil rights were seen as pass'e and sellout-ish to later generations. The author does a magnificent job in tracing possible influences on Barthe's art. Some may feel that she diverges in order to increase the size of the text, but many art books are comparative works. As much as I appreciate this text, I am very upset that the author mentions Robert Mapplethorpe without criticizing him. Mapplethorpe may have pushed the envelope on freedom of expression, but his "Little Black Book" has been condemned by many Black, gay activists. Many Black gay men, including myself, bristle when we hear his name. For the author to say nothing about that artist's villainy in the Black, gay community is truly disturbing. To the opposite of Mapplethorpe is Carl Van Vechten. Van Vechten upset many Blacks by publishing a book with the n-word in its title. However, writings on Van Vechten have documented that Blacks of the time loved, loved, loved him. There's a whole book about writings between Van Vechten and gay, Black poet Langston Hughes. This book reveals that Barthe wrote to the photographer frequently. Van Vechten photographed famous Blacks and did not present them as being B-list and second-class compared to whites. This book reminded me that I need to read more about this perplexing man. From an advertising perspective, I struggle with something. The cover includes one of Barthe's sculptures. That makes sense as his art is what made him (somewhat) famous. Too, the piece selected is both Afrocentric and homoerotic, pointing to the author's mission to discuss Black and gay matters in her book. However, I wonder if a photo of the sculptor would have been better. Unlike what biographers admitted about Diego Rivera, the author here points out that Barthe was handsome. Photos inside the book

corroborate this. I wonder if readers would be more interested in the book by seeing the hot brutha inside.

Great book in an important figure in the HR!

Sculptors like Barthe and Richard Hunt deserve all the study and critical acclaim they get. They came up in times that were everything from indifferent to outright hostile to black artists, and on their own terms they triumphed. The book tells a fascinating story in a way that places the magnitude of the achievement and the humanity of the man in full context.

very good history of the times and of the struggles of creative people with alternative lifestyles

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