

NOVEMBER 10, 2020

Acquisition: Roy DeCarava, "Dancers"



Roy DeCarava

Dancers, 1956

gelatin silver print

30.48 x 24.77 cm (12 x 9 3/4 in.)

Promised Gift of Betsy Karel

The Gallery has been promised a gelatin silver print of Roy DeCarava's *Dancers* (1956) from Betsy Karel, who has previously contributed numerous photographs and works on paper to the Gallery's collection. DeCarava has inspired a wide range of photographers with his complex and layered depictions of African American life. His influence can be found in the work of Carrie Mae Weems (b. 1953), Dawoud Bey (b. 1953), and the members of the Kamoinge Workshop, a collective of African American photographers established in New York City in 1963.

DeCarava (1919–2009) came to maturity during the Harlem Renaissance, a period of cultural

DeCarava (1917–2007) came to maturity during the Harlem Renaissance, a period of cultural explosion centered in African American communities after the First World War. He sought to create photographs that deviated from the prevailing social documentary trends of the time and refuted, as he wrote, the “superficial . . . caricatured” depictions of African Americans. His photographs show African American life from the inside and create, in his words, “the kind of penetrating insight and understanding of Negroes which I believe only a Negro photographer can interpret.”

One of his most celebrated pictures, *Dancers* was taken during an intermission at a Harlem social club. DeCarava saw it as a deeply complex and challenging picture. He described the male dancers as being “in some ways distorted characters” who were dancing in the manner of an older generation of vaudeville performers. He continued: “The problem comes because their figures remind me so much of the real-life experience of blacks in their need to put themselves in an awkward position before the man, for the man; to demean themselves in order to survive, to get along. In a way, these figures seem to epitomize that reality.” DeCarava also recognized that “there is something in the figures not about that; something in the figures that is very creative, that is very real and very black in the finest sense of the word.”

Dancers joins the 11 photographs by DeCarava already in the Gallery’s collection. Together they provide a complex and incisive insight into mid-20th-century African American life.

Press Release

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