

I Teach Painting in Prisons And I Find a Cry For Love

By Benny Andrews

No MATTER HOW many times I knock on the huge steel door to get the attention of the guard on the other side, I always feel queasy inside. I can't always put my finger on the source of that feeling grabbing at my innards, but it has a lot to do with going into the Tombs to give another drawing class.

The Tombs is the colloquial name for the Manhattan House of Detention for Men. It is located in the middle of Justice Lane, with slick looking types reeking of law school ideas of how a lawyer should look. Men are kept here until their trial comes up, then they are either freed or sent to a "house of correction."

The guard said, "Right this way, Mr. Andrews," a marked contrast to the first time I came there, unknown, ready to launch an experiment that led to new friendships and some totally new reactions to life.

The day of that first class, I was met inside the heavy iron doors by a group from the Junior Council from the Museum of Modern Art and two volunteers from the Board of Corrections: Mrs. Barbara Jacobson and Mrs. Liz Susman—plus a reporter from the N.Y. Times. Officer Herman W. Green, program department, was in charge of the class and was our guide for the first class.

As we got into the elevator which would take us up to the library, I had a feeling I might never see any inmates, only blue uniformed men who said little and looked very somber. The library—like any institutional library—had a formal group of tables and chairs, and shelves of books. Atop the shelves were little pieces of sculpture which must have been done by the inmates, and I thought, "we're getting warm."

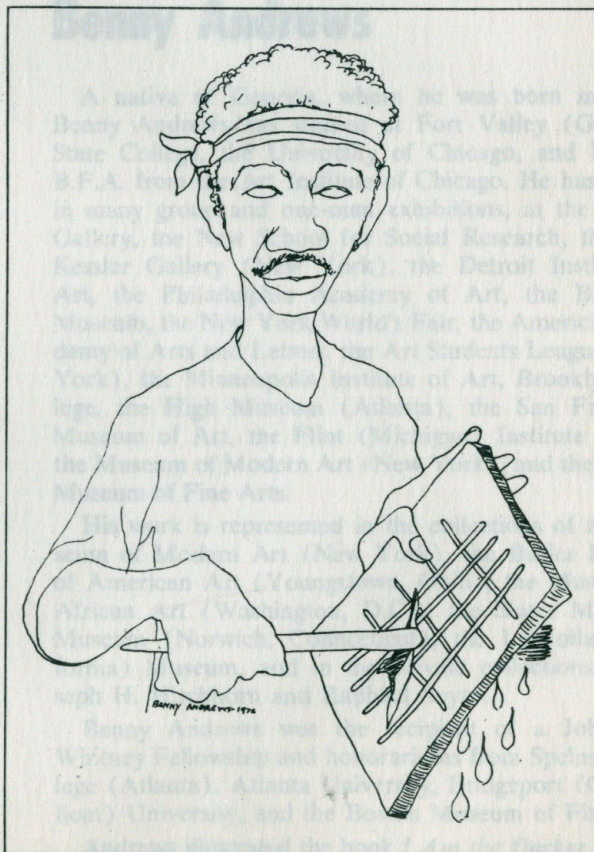
From there we went into the high-ceiling assembly hall and chapel where I set up my easel and sketching board. Standing on the small platform while the committee sat in the rows of chairs, I felt like an actor more than a painter. I wondered how to reconcile the social obligations that I professed to be involved in, with the problems of becoming a good artist. Most of all I kept asking myself, "How in hell can I get something over to these guys from a standpoint of being artistically valid and at the same time not be a living bore?" I also felt that the committee in the audience was viewing this as an experiment, and that they were going to reach conclusions about my presentation and the inmates' reception of it. The importance of the demonstration began to get to me.

Suddenly the door to the back of the hall opened

and a stream of quiet people came in—my students for the demonstration. The guards pointed out seats to them, and I looked at their faces. They looked familiar. They looked like my regular students. In fact, they even looked like me! They were me; I was them. We were, in fact, each other.

A sense of relaxation came over me. I don't remember exactly what I said that first day. I know that I asked for a model, one leaped up on the stage, and then we all began to draw. They were hungry to work, and

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A ROAD TO FREEDOM. "The Thrust," by Benny Andrews, appeared on the catalog of a show, *Inmates and Former Inmates*, sponsored by the Metropolitan Applied Research Center.

**"If you become a teacher,
by your pupils you'll be taught"**

Oscar Hammerstein 2nd

it went on like any other art class, except that I was surprised by the amount of inherent ability I encountered in those rows of men. They were eager to see each other's work, and I held up examples.

Suddenly time was running out, and I still wanted to tell them about basic composition, and working from the imagination. So I told them how I felt it had been a great couple of hours and they started asking if I was coming back. I shrugged and looked inquiringly toward the committee.

Then the class let out a burst of applause, and I began to gather my equipment, keeping my back toward them because I felt so damned helpless. Somehow it was not right that a simple drawing lesson like this meant so much to them. I was flattered by their response. And I was almost ashamed to realize that I was walking out of there intact to go back to my profession, but they were to be trooped back to the cells that I knew existed unseen behind the walls.

The Junior Council and the Board of Correction members met back in the library and it was agreed that I could return in two weeks to give another class, and that four other artists could come at two week intervals to do the same thing. An art program seemed to be launched at last.

Two and a half years later, and with an expanded program that includes classes at the Bronx House of Detention and other prisons, the classes at the facility in downtown Manhattan remain the focal point of the art endeavor.

As the program expanded, I began taking my art students from Queens College to aid me at the Tombs. The girls really get ogled by the men. They model, they get involved in all of the projects and the inmates are so courteous it is truly unbelievable. They don't criticize the shortage of materials, they start working and they really work.

Going up in the elevators, the students are generally apprehensive the first time around, as I was. I know by now the thoughts running through their minds: "there are people here who have committed robbery, rape, murder . . . WOW!" My pupils displayed feelings of being catapulted into a group of people who would be different from themselves. They always come out with the realization that, unlike their imaginings, the inmates are real people just like themselves. They start listening to the prisoners, and they notice how sensitive the men are to them, to their thinking and their emotions. And the prisoners are as nervous as the students. They know that people from outside think of them as maniacal killers and rapists and on down the line. They know that they could explain from now until doomsday, and people would still say, "sure, whaddy expect from a criminal? Truth?"

But in their paintings and drawings, we do get truth. Most of the artists work small, for instance. This is a result of economic restrictions imposed by a short supply of materials as well as from the psychology of being oppressed. The paintings reflect the world of the artist—what it lacks as well as what it has. The men often paint idealized women and idyllic visions of open landscapes. It's also interesting to see the soothing influence of religion and occasional political themes. But the most important aspect of art in our prisons, is the



Benny Andrews

A native of Georgia, where he was born in 1930, Benny Andrews has studied at Fort Valley (Georgia) State College, the University of Chicago, and holds a B.F.A. from the Art Institute of Chicago. He has shown in many group and one-man exhibitions, at the Forum Gallery, the New School for Social Research, the Paul Kessler Gallery (New York), the Detroit Institute of Art, the Philadelphia Academy of Art, the Brooklyn Museum, the New York World's Fair, the American Academy of Arts and Letters, the Art Students League (New York), the Minneapolis Institute of Art, Brooklyn College, the High Museum (Atlanta), the San Francisco Museum of Art, the Flint (Michigan) Institute of Art, the Museum of Modern Art (New York), and the Boston Museum of Fine Arts.

His work is represented in the collections of the Museum of Modern Art (New York), the Butler Institute of American Art (Youngstown, Ohio), the Museum of African Art (Washington, D.C.), the Slater Memorial Museum (Norwich, Connecticut), the La Jolla (California) Museum, and in the private collections of Joseph H. Hirshhorn and Raphael Soyer.

Benny Andrews was the recipient of a John Hay Whitney Fellowship and honorariums from Spelman College (Atlanta), Atlanta University, Bridgeport (Connecticut) University, and the Boston Museum of Fine Arts.

Andrews illustrated the book *I Am the Darker Brother* (1968) and has taught at California State College (Hayward), Queens College, and the New School for Social Research. He recently had his second one-man show at the A.C.A. Gallery in New York City.