



BMA Presents *Richard Yarde: Beyond the Savoy*

[A decade after his passing, the acclaimed Black artist is recognized as one of the greatest watercolorists of the 20th century](#)

For media in Baltimore

Anne Brown

410-274-9907

abrown@artbma.org

For media outside

Baltimore

Alina E. Sumajin

PAVE Communications

& Consulting

646-369-2050

alina@paveconsult.com

BALTIMORE, MD (August 18, 2021)— The Baltimore Museum of Art (BMA) presents a new exhibition that spans nearly four decades of work by Richard Yarde, one of the greatest watercolor artists of the 20th century. *Richard Yarde: Beyond the Savoy* features 28 paintings that demonstrate how the artist’s innovative and virtuosic watercolors celebrated Black history and culture in the U.S. while expanding the possibilities of the medium. It also marks the first return of the artist’s work to Baltimore after the BMA’s 1983 presentation of *Richard Yarde: Savoy*. *Richard Yarde: Beyond the Savoy* is on view in the Cone Collection galleries November 21, 2021–April 24, 2022.

Yarde is best known for his vibrant and monumental watercolors of Black historical and popular figures. For a medium that was generally thought of as intimate and miniature, Yarde worked on a bold scale and created his own unique style that drew equally from modernist aesthetics and the jazz culture and politics of the Harlem Renaissance. He often employed large sheets of watercolor paper that at times extended his imagery beyond a single sheet and painted angled compositions with a grid-like, fragmented aesthetic and flattened picture planes—notably inspired by European post-Impressionists and Modernists Paul Cezanne, Paul Gauguin, and Henri Matisse, whose works are shown in adjacent galleries.

“The BMA’s presentation of Richard Yarde’s work in 1983 captured an important moment in the trajectory of the artist’s career and invited audiences to experience an artist with a truly singular vision. With the forthcoming exhibition, we are once again engaging visitors with Yarde’s innovative approach and the compelling visual quality of his paintings. It is an exciting opportunity to deepen understanding of the significance of Yarde’s practice to art history and wider cultural dialogues,” said Christopher Bedford, the BMA’s Dorothy Wagner Wallis Director.

Among the exhibition highlights are portraits of activists and politicians such as Marcus Garvey and Malcolm X and actors and athletes like Paul Robeson and Jack Johnson, as well as lively compositions of swing-era dancers and jazz musicians. Yarde also depicted poignant scenes of Black life, such as parades, funerals, family portraits, and the neighborhood where he grew up in Roxbury, Massachusetts. Most of these coloristic and compositional masterpieces were created without preliminary drawings, as Yarde improvised in pigment in a manner not unlike the jazz and blues musicians who were his frequent subjects. He was also inspired by historical Black photographers such as James Van Der Zee—whose work is included in the exhibition.

“In developing the exhibition, we had the opportunity to study a selection of Richard Yarde’s unframed works on paper. It was incredible to discover so few graphite marks or underdrawings in these works. Yarde was truly improvising directly on paper and canvas with a loaded watercolor brush. To experience that so intimately adds to our understanding of his innate ability and incredible technique,” said Oliver Shell, BMA Curator of European Painting and Sculpture and exhibition curator.

As Yarde struggled with illness later in life, the focus of his paintings shifted to themes of vulnerability and healing. Dealing with medical issues of a failing body did not halt his creations, and even shaped his work as he incorporated primitive marks and ancient symbols. This led ultimately to his much-admired late style, a reinvention of the self and turn towards a grander symbolic and philosophical preoccupation with themes of mortality and life-purpose evident in his *Mojo Hands* and *Kismet* series.

This exhibition is curated by Oliver Shell, BMA Curator of European Painting and Sculpture.

Richard Yarde

Richard Yarde (American, 1939-2011) was born in Boston’s segregated Roxbury neighborhood and lived in Northampton for much of his life. He earned a BFA *cum laude* and an MFA from Boston University and taught art at several prestigious colleges and universities before becoming a professor at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst in 1990. He began painting with watercolors in the 1970s and soon received widespread critical acclaim for his monumental works. In 1982, Yarde created *Savoy*, a large-scale, three-dimensional installation that celebrated the memory of the famous Savoy Ballroom in Harlem. Organized by the Mount Holyoke College Art Museum, the exhibition traveled to the San Diego Museum of Art, the Baltimore Museum of Art, and The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, and was hailed by the *New York Times* as “the most spectacular installation of the year.” Yarde’s work has been presented in solo and group exhibitions throughout the country and his paintings are in nearly three dozen public collections, including The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; Baltimore Museum of Art; Smithsonian Museum of American Art; and Worcester Art Museum.

Baltimore Museum of Art

Founded in 1914, the Baltimore Museum of Art (BMA) inspires people of all ages and backgrounds through exhibitions, programs, and collections that tell an expansive story of art—challenging long-held narratives and embracing new voices. Our outstanding collection of more than 95,000 objects spans many eras and cultures and includes the world’s largest public holding of works by Henri Matisse; one of the nation’s finest collections of prints, drawings, and photographs; and a rapidly growing number of works by contemporary artists of diverse backgrounds. The museum is also distinguished by a neoclassical building designed by American architect John Russell Pope and two beautifully landscaped gardens featuring an array of modern and contemporary sculpture. The BMA is located three miles north of the Inner Harbor, adjacent to the main campus of Johns Hopkins University, and has a community branch at Lexington Market. General admission is free so that everyone can enjoy the power of art. artbma.org

Visitor Information

General admission to the BMA is free. The BMA is open Wednesday through Sunday from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Timed reservations, face masks, and answering two questions about COVID-19 exposure are required for all visitors. The Sculpture Gardens are open Wednesday through Sunday, 10 a.m. to dusk. The museum and gardens are closed New Year's Day, Juneteenth, July 4, Thanksgiving Day, and Christmas Day. The BMA is located at 10 Art Museum Drive, three miles north of Baltimore's Inner Harbor. For general museum information, call 443-573-1700 or visit artbma.org.

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