



Exhibition Archive - Portrait of the Harlem Renaissance by James Van DerZee

[CU Home](#) / [Caah](#) / [Leegallery](#) / [Archive](#) /

January 11th, 2006 - February 10th, 2006

The Harlem Renaissance flashes images of jazz, glamorous nightlife, and cultural stars on the screen of history. The Harlem Renaissance during the first decades of the twentieth century glowed with African American writers, poets, artists and musicians. The supporting cast of the renaissance included the African American middle class residents of Harlem. These prosperous black families went to church, had families, weddings and funerals. This supporting cast is often lost in a romantic screening of the Harlem Renaissance but they are the subject of much of the life's work of James Van DerZee, photographer.

The screen of history often flashes images of poor, struggling African Americans or black super stars, ignoring the black middle class. James Van DerZee, as a studio photographer celebrated Harlem's black middle class of the first half of the twentieth century. He made the memories of childhoods and family events and street scenes into visual images, preserved for all time. James Van DerZee's images are not for the silent screen but are talkies that tell the stories of the people and places he photographed. The artistry of his work is in his empathy and caring for his subjects. His photographs tell us who his sitters were with great beauty and warmth. Van DerZee always flattered his sitters seeking to make their picture as beautiful as he knew them to be.

Portraits of The Harlem Renaissance by James Van DerZee is a show, not of the extremes of history but the Harlem residence during the Renaissance who raised families, went to church and enjoyed, the too few, decades of Harlem prosperity. Portraits completes the big screen view of the cultural glow of the Harlem Renaissance with James Van DerZee's photographs of lives, not larger than life pictures. Portraits are black and white photographs that record in dazzling light James Van DerZee's life and the lives of those around him in Harlem.

James Van DerZee himself was "discovered" at 83 with an exhibition about Harlem at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Born at the end of the nineteenth century, Mr. Van DerZee's work utilized photographic processes from glass plates and flash powder to film and light meters. He began photographing as a child with a mail order photographic kit using his closet as a darkroom. The Van DerZee's and their extended family painted and played music for their personal pleasure. James Van DerZee's original ambition was to earn his living as a musician. Photography satisfied his mechanical curiosity and utilized his natural design sense and visual sensitivity for light.

Archetype & Memory: Art Students Respond to Romare Bearden Collages is also on view in Lee Gallery. Living Stage (Performing Arts students with Professor Carrie Ann Collins) has produced a video performance of an interview with James Van DerZee that is available in the gallery during the exhibition. Visitors to the gallery can activate and enjoy this video performance.

In conjunction with the exhibitions and presented by Lee Gallery are:

- Friends of Lee Gallery pARTy on January 31, 6:00 to 7:45pm at Lee Gallery, prior to performance at the Brooks Center of 12 Moods of Jazz: Ask Your Mama.
- Rhapsodies in Black: Art of the Harlem Renaissance, a lecture by Andrea Barnwell, art historian and Director of the Spelman Museum at 4:30 pm in Room 111, Lee Hall.
- Lunch and Learn, casual, lunchtime gallery tour of Portraits on February 8 at 12:15pm in Lee Gallery.

Portraits of the Harlem Renaissance by James Van DerZee is part of The Langston Hughes Project presented in conjunction with the Brooks Center for the Performing Arts, the Gantt Intercultural Center, and the Departments of Art, African American Studies and English.

[Directions](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Site Assistance](#) | [Events](#)
 Copyright 2005 Clemson University
 Administration (Requires Login)

Lee Gallery
 G-50 Lee Hall
 (864) 656-3883
 Box 340509
 Clemson, SC 29634-0509