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## Neglected in his lifetime, the late African-American artist Robert Reed's paintings are a revelation



San Romano Central State, Robert Reed

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At a time when interest in previously neglected African-American art is rising, London is the unexpected location for a revelatory show of work by Robert Reed, an abstract artist who spent his life teaching art with little or no recognition.

When he died in 2014, his family found a stockpile of barely seen boldly coloured paintings, drawings and prints in his New Haven studio, some of which are being shown for the first time.

Reed was born in 1938 and brought up in Charlottesville, Virginia, one of the most racially divided areas of the United States. Here he lived in extreme poverty, eating for periods of time solely from the fruit of a pear tree in his yard.

Education was still segregated, but he managed to work his way into the more integrated art education system at Yale School of Art.

Here, Josef Albers, the revered Bauhaus artist whose pupils included [Robert Rauschenberg](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/art/what-to-see/robert-rauschenberg-spreads-1975-83-galerie-thaddaeus-ropac/) (<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/art/what-to-see/robert-rauschenberg-spreads-1975-83-galerie-thaddaeus-ropac/>), [Cy Twombly](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/obituaries/culture-obituaries/art-obituaries/8620297/Cy-Twombly.html) (<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/obituaries/culture-obituaries/art-obituaries/8620297/Cy-Twombly.html>), [Eva Hesse](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/art/art-reviews/5948238/Eva-Hesse-her-dark-materials.html) (<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/art/art-reviews/5948238/Eva-Hesse-her-dark-materials.html>) and [Richard Serra](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/art/3576849/The-man-of-steel-re-shaping-centuries-of-sculpture.html) (<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/art/3576849/The-man-of-steel-re-shaping-centuries-of-sculpture.html>), recognised Reed's talent and selected him to mix the colours of the silk screens for his hugely influential book, *Interaction of Colour* (1963).

Reed went on to teach at Yale, where, during his 45-year career at the elite Ivy League University, he was the only black American professor. He was, by all accounts, an inspiring but quite authoritarian teacher. He was also very private; he never discussed his own art.

With its interest in symmetry, balance and architecture, Reed's work could be loosely categorised under hard edge abstraction, but it was also scattered with Reed's own symbols and metaphors.



San Romano Hydraulic Lift, Robert Reed

Until the mid-Seventies, Reed exhibited on the university gallery circuit and occasionally at the Washburn Gallery in New York. His most important exhibition was in 1972 at the Whitney Museum of American Art, which acquired one of his paintings. After that, though, he seems to slip from view.

He was not very good with dealers, says his widow, Susan Whetstone, but it was also hard at the time for artists of colour to break through. By adhering to abstraction he antagonised other African-Americans, too, because it seemed he was aping the language of white Americans.

After he died, a memorial curated by Robert Storr, a former curator at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, was staged at Yale.

Last night, Storr told The Telegraph: "Robert Reed was the pivotal formative influence for generations of students at Yale who went on to have memorable careers. Little seen by anyone until after his death, the paintings and drawings he quietly produced during that period prove that he made memorably expressive, structurally complex and important work himself. It is high time that Reed's evergreen formalist abstractions became better known."

But there was no rush to buy his work. He was simply not well known enough - he could be one of the most overlooked artists of his generation.

Even so, his students rated him highly. Among them were two young artists who now have strong followings - Rachel Rose, the American video artist, and Tala Madani, the Iranian painter, both of whom show with Pilar Corrias gallery in London.



The Battle of San Romano, Paolo Uccello (c. 1438-40) CREDIT: THE NATIONAL GALLERY, LONDON

Corrias now represents Reed's estate and faces the challenge of building his reputation posthumously. For his inaugural show in London, she is exhibiting a series of large paintings and drawings that Reed made following a visit to London's National Gallery in 1979.

Reed had been particularly inspired by Paolo Uccello, the 15th-century Florentine artist, (1397-1475), a mathematician who is widely credited with developing the use of perspective in painting.

Uccello's most famous series are the three paintings of the Battle of San Romano (one of which is in the NG), which present a complex geometry. When he returned home, Reed embarked on his own series, examples from which are on display in the Pilar Corrias gallery.

In his double canvas *San Romano Monticello Brick* (1979), in reference to the statesman Thomas Jefferson's neoclassical villa, Monticello, near Charlottesville, Reed turns the geometric structure of Uccello's combat into a "battle of shape and colour, creating a Euclidean whirlwind", wrote Joost Joustra, the NG curator.

Other African-American abstract artists of Reed's generation whose reputations have recently been revived, such as Jack Whitten and Sam Gilliam, have surpassed the million-dollar marker at auction.

But as there has been little trade in Reed's art before, prices will start at \$20,000 (£15,300), and museums and institutions will rightly get first dibs.

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