

Felrath Hines in the 1960s

If you teleported back to the 1960s, into the battle for Black justice, you'd see unrest in the streets and activists like Dr. King, Malcolm X, and Huey P. Newton on the national microphone. There was a community that was changing its name from negro to Afro-American to Black as they thought through who they were. A lot of people were thinking and talking about what it meant to be Black and all sorts of Black artists were working out how they could reflect Blackness and the struggle for liberation in their work—from singers like James Brown and Nina Simone to poets like Nikki Giovanni and Leroi Jones to novelists like James Baldwin and Ralph Ellison. In 1963, in Harlem, a group of Black visual artists began getting together to talk about how they could use their art to speak to the movements going on all around them. They would come to be known as the Spiral Group—among the 15 regulars were Romare Bearden, Charles Alston, Norman Lewis, and a painter named Felrath Hines who was then in his 50s. Hines had then been working for decades and was well respected within the Spiral Group. By the 60s he was committed to Abstract Expressionism and used a vibrant palate and gestural, looser brush strokes to depict landscapes and colors at play. He's exploring the interplay of line and color to create paintings that can call up a meditative state. You can get lost in them. This was some of the most important work of his career.



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Hines's work was at odds with the representative work that Bearden, Alston, and others in the Spiral Group was diving into. Their meetings were held once a week in Bearden's living room, surely at night, probably in a room filled with booze and cigarette smoke and ego and laughter and ideas. They asked each other the questions that so many Black artists were asking. What does it mean to be a Black artist? Does it mean the artist talks about Black subjects, Black issues, and/or Black culture, or is any artist who's Black automatically a Black artist no matter what they do with their work? Can you be a Black artist and not work in service of Black liberation? Can you be Black and an artist and choose to not be a Black artist? But Hines was going in an entirely different direction. He contended that Black painters are not required to put political concerns into their art. When he got to his canvases and his brushes, he wanted to focus on time, color, space, and line. "I was really interested in ideas rather than subject matter."

Hines was born in Indianapolis in 1913 and began studying art at 13. He trained at the Art Institute of Chicago and moved to New York in 1946, when he was 32. By the time Spiral started Hines had already spent decades making pictures. He was an Abstract Expressionist inspired by Cubism and the De Stijl movement and Constructivism and Minimalism and Pablo Picasso and Henri Matisse and Piet Mondrian and the metaphysical and the sublime. He loved to pile on the color so his

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Felrath Hines

Landscape, 1953

Oil on wood

10 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 14 $\frac{1}{4}$ inches (25.7 x 36.2 cm)

Initialed at lower right: FH



paintings had a sense of luminosity and vibrancy. He was an abstract painter from the beginning. He once said, “When I first began to seriously consider becoming a painter I was sure I wanted to work abstractly . . . Rendering subject matter to look real had already been done far better than I would ever be able to. So why not paint abstractly and be creative? . . . I eventually found working abstractly to be spiritually fulfilling.”

Abstraction let him create work that could be universal. Hines was steadfast that his work should not be just for Black audiences but for everyone. Nothing in the work said this is by a Black person and none of it spoke to the Black liberation struggle going on all around him. He also spurned the term Black artist. And as he painted through the decades and grew into a major artist, he resisted invitations to join Black shows. Hines said, “I find it difficult to participate in a show whose *raison d’être* is based on skin color . . . I find such shows disturbing and of doubtful merit.”

Now, if I was in the Spiral Group in the 60s, I might have had some friendly but heated arguments with Hines because I don’t believe that paintings by Bearden or Jacob

Lawrence that depict Black subjects and dive deeply into the nuances and rhythms of Black lives are just for Black audiences. Why is it that white people or white neighborhoods are universal but Black subjects are niche? Well, because whitecentrism demands that white people be at the center of the world and everyone else is otherized and I understand that but I also believe that Black culture is incredibly rich and inspiring and at the center of what it is to be American. To me the opportunity to put an artistic lens on my community is powerful. I believe that being a Black artist is a privilege and I revere the towering artistic geniuses who have both portrayed and embodied Black culture in books, albums, films, and paintings. I love writing about Black people and I long to see art that depicts Black people, but I also love to see art by Black people whether or not it overtly discusses Blackness. I am here for the full range of expression that any Black artist wants to pursue which means I fully respect Hines’ choices to say nothing about Blackness.

At the same time, I think I understand Hines’ point. He was fine with his art being free of race because he thought it helped open his possibilities. He didn’t want to be

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pigeon-holed and minimized. Being seen as a Black artist can mean being of lesser importance to many white viewers. It can take you out of the center ring for them. Rather than being a Black artist, you can be an artist who happens to be Black and that can feel like liberation. That can feel like equality.

Hines remained committed to his identity as a painter for many decades. In 1984, when he was 72, he retired from a long career as a conservator at the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery and Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden. While he was working he was doing so in order to support himself as a painter. When a friend introduced him as a conservator, he corrected them and said I'm a painter. In retirement there was no question—now he was a full-time painter. He worked every day, and in nine years made over 60 paintings that show him developing his own distinct voice. He remained an abstract painter, expanding his vibrant color palette of the 1960s, now in hard-edged geometric, rather than gestural, forms. Beginning in the 1960s and throughout the 1980s, his images became more pronounced and poetic and rhythmic and harmonious. You can see the joy in his work and the deep focus and the clarity of mind that he brings to his art at this stage. In his last years he fulfilled his dream of living as a painter and exploring his talent and his mind as deeply as possible and it shows in the work. He wasn't making art that spoke overtly

about Blackness the way Bearden and others did, but he was still a Black artist even if he rejected the term. He said that one of the Blackest forms of art in the world was at the core of his art. Hines said, "I wanted to become an abstract painter because of my initial interest in jazz music."

Black culture is so powerful that it sticks to the soul of everyone who gets immersed in it like hot gumbo sticking to your ribs. Hines had jazz up inside him—the sound entered his ears, coated his mind, and came out through his brushes. It makes sense to me that jazz helped inspire Hines' abstract approach, they're like siblings. With jazz as a critical part of his artistic soul, Hines springs from the soil of Black culture. So if I was there in Bearden's loft, arguing with Hines about Blackness, I would say that Blackness can take on many forms, there's not one absolute shape. Blackness is both Bearden's vision of Harlem and also Hines' jazz-inspired abstraction. And I would say that if jazz is an essential influence on Hines, and jazz is quintessentially Black, then Hines, no matter what he says, is absolutely a Black artist. Maybe he would accept that in the spirit of ideas but maybe he wouldn't. Maybe it would make him mad and Bearden would have to separate us to keep the peace. But I know that no matter what Hines said about being a Black artist, and no matter what his work looked like, he was definitely a Black artist.



TOURÉ is a TV host, a podcaster, and the author of eight books including *The Ivy League Counterfeiter* and the Prince oral history *Nothing Compares 2 U*. He is a host and creative director at TheGrio.com. He is also the host of the podcast "Touré Show" which has had over four million downloads. He's also the creator and host of "Who Was

Prince?" a podcast docuseries exploring the life of Prince and also the creator and host of the podcast docuseries "Being Black in the 80s." He was the co-host of MSNBC's "The Cycle" and a host at MTV and BET and a correspondent at CNN and a writer for *Rolling Stone*, the *New York Times*, *The New Yorker*, and many other publications. He lives in Brooklyn with his wife and two children.

Hines painting method involved the painstaking application of countless layers of color, a process that yielded depth and luminosity as well as pristine surfaces. In *Radiant*, he works within a restricted color scheme, playing dark and light values of blue and lavender-gray against gentle beams of peach and yellow. At first glance, the edges of the composition appear precise, but Hines applied them freehand, without the use of masking tape, so they wouldn't feel mechanical, or in his words, "stiff." While other Washington painters such as Gene Davis and Alma Thomas emphasized pattern and rhythm in their work, Hines valued balance and harmony above all, as a means of conveying, "visual as well as spiritual pleasure."

("Balance and Harmony: Radiant by Felrath Hines," Smithsonian American Art Museum, February 25, 2020, <https://americanart.si.edu/blog/radiant-felrath-hines>)



Radiant, 1983. Oil on linen, 72 x 96 inches. Smithsonian American Art Museum

Museum Collections



Smithsonian American Art Museum
Abstract Landscape, 1964. Oil on linen, 72 x 72 inches



The Art Institute of Chicago
Untitled, 1955–65. Oil on cream card, 36¼ x 24 inches



Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art
Untitled (Abstraction), c. 1960. Oil on linen, 48⅛ x 60 inches



The Art Institute of Chicago
White Cap, 1965. Oil on linen, 32 x 41 inches

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Andrew Schoelkopf literally grew up in an American painting gallery. His father, Robert Schoelkopf, opened an art gallery on Madison Avenue in 1958 and continued to run the family business until his passing in 1991. Andrew joined the Robert Schoelkopf Gallery (a member of the Art Dealers Association of America) as Director in 1989.

After the closing of the Robert Schoelkopf Gallery, Andrew joined Christie's auction house as a Specialist in American Paintings and became Senior Vice President and Director of the American Paintings Department in 1995, leading several of the firm's most successful auctions and private sales in the genre. Andrew managed the 1998 auction of American Paintings, Drawings and Sculpture from the Estate of Thomas Mellon Evans, which sold nearly \$50,000,000. Mr. Schoelkopf subsequently held a number of senior positions with Christie's as Director of Business Development for North and South America and in his final post with the firm as President of Christie's Internet Auction business in 1999. Mr. Schoelkopf was a member of Christie's Business Development, Management, and Operating Committees.

Andrew holds a Bachelor's degree from Denison University and a Masters of Business Administration from Fordham University Graduate School of Business. He is a past member of the Board of Directors of the Private Art Dealers Association of America, The Art Show Committee of the Art Dealers Association of America, the board of the ADAA Foundation, and the National Advisory Council of the Reynolda House Museum in Winston-Salem, North Carolina.

Andrew proudly serves as Board Chair of the Chordoma Foundation, an international non-profit that raises awareness and seeks to find a cure for chordoma, a rare cancer that affects the spine. Andrew was previously the Chair of the Foundation's Education and Outreach Committee and is a member of the Development Committee, Finance Committee, and Nominating Committee. Andrew has served in many roles in the fine art industry and is the President of the Art Dealers Association of America. Andrew is a member of the Board of Advisors to Denison University in Granville, Ohio and of the Parents' Committee at the College of Wooster in Wooster, Ohio.

Andrew, his wife Grace, and their two children, Henry and William, live in Greenwich, Connecticut and Chatham, Massachusetts.

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Alana Ricca joined Schoelkopf Gallery in the fall of 2018, drawing on five years of experience in the art world at an international auction house where she was most recently a Specialist in the Post-War &

Contemporary Art Department. As Director of Administration, Alana oversees the firm's business planning, strategy, and execution of the gallery's programming, client management, business development, sales, marketing, and communications.

Alana holds a B.A. in Russian and Eurasian Studies and Art History from Colgate University, with a specific concentration on Contemporary Russian painting, and speaks fluent Russian.