



# Robert Gwathmey: The Life and Art of a Passionate Observer

*Michael Kammen*

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American artist Robert Gwathmey (1903-1988) was a leading member of the Social Realist movement that flourished from the 1930s through the 1950s. Like his fellow Social Realists, Gwathmey sought to use his art to expose privilege and pretense, demand social justice, and call for major changes in the prevailing socioeconomic system.

Gwathmey was an eighth-generation Virginian of Welsh heritage, and throughout his life his main artistic themes were race relations and his native South. He is perhaps best remembered as the first white American painter to depict African Americans in an unromanticized, respectful manner. Using a unique style that combined a deliberate two-dimensional flatness with deep and vivid colors, Gwathmey illuminated the inherent dignity of the tenant farmers and sharecroppers who were his subjects.

As a lifelong activist against injustice, Gwathmey was kept under surveillance by the FBI for nearly thirty years. Using Gwathmey's FBI file, along with numerous interviews and archival records, Michael Kammen crafts a compelling portrait of an engaging American painter in the midst of dramatic social and political change.

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