

HOW WE DECIDED, GO WITH RICHARD

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As president of the Sankore Society, the organization of black faculty and administrators at Brown University, I was involved with the campus-wide celebration of the 100th anniversary of the 1877 graduation from Brown University of its first black graduate and valedictorian, Inman Page. Part of the celebration included the unveiling of an oil portrait of Page. This short piece describes not only how we chose Richard Yarde to paint the portrait but also refers to our giving the watercolor study to novelist Ralph Ellison when we found out that Page had been his grade school principal in Oklahoma.

It could only have been Richard Yarde, for his was the participation in this dance that sealed the movement as a recurring testament to the primacy of composition.

We had at the time the example of personal composition, the example of Inman Page's 19th century testing at an Ivy League school in Providence, Rhode Island. He was son to a slave. He journeyed to Howard, then transferred to Brown where his forte, like the invisible narrator's, was the verbal, the spoken (again, composition—a putting together in coherent fashion the wonder of different sounds). So it was Page wearing the 1877 class orator's robe that June. Then, graduating, he composed a life of benefaction, of touching those who had not yet learned to know. And suddenly there was that strange moment when his spirit was entwined physically and metaphysically with the artist who was to chronicle the avenues of cultural composition: when Inman Edward Page as principal of a grade school in Oklahoma City grabbed an overly energetic student named Ralph Ellison in the hallway, by the arm. "Young man ..."

So it was Page's personal journey as composition, as putting together the features of his face, of composing a life that bled so for his people, which led us at Brown in the first place to go looking for an artist to paint a portrait in oils of the first black to have graduated from the college.

His name had come up the way names float through and around an indeterminate haze and a thousand conversations without ever settling in anyone's consciousness. And then suddenly our committee was looking at his work.

And we saw the attraction, the stated and overt proof, the screaming admittance of a love for composition. Now there was in the larger composition of our search for an artist the specific example of an artist revering composition—the putting together, the arranging of experience. And it was more than physical, more than a mere preoccupation with and idiosyncratic attraction for shapes and degrees and balance. No, it was a notice, an implicit understanding that the nature of composition is the composition of nature. The artist composes to explain nature, which is saying that the artist composes to explain composition.

Yarde's artistic statements rearranged or broke up the composition of the true

bloods in our Afro-American history like Jack Johnson, powerfully bashful; and those kids on the brownstone steps, plaintively happy, and Daddy Grace, outrageously resplendent. Yarde is giving us reflections of cultural patterns, images of kin, snap shots of the soul.

He, like Page and Ellison, is interested in composition, which can be the journey each of us is responsible for; and it is also the manner in which the artist composes the journey. Therefore, the curious affinity to Ellison's work: Yarde's sings of the same compositional patterns. He highlights recurring themes and moods which are anguished, ludicrous, comic stances like the composition of Page's history and the composition of the individual narrator's journey. The tones are earthy, worldly. The vision is sacred, prophetic.

Yarde, Page, Ellison: the three were contemporaneous in the playing out of their histories, their compositions of personal choice. The composition of nature demanded therefore that the three be linked, so Yarde was commissioned to paint the portrait of Page and then Ellison was presented with the watercolor study and at one point a photographer looked through his viewfinder in the lobby of the John D. Rockefeller, Jr. Library and composed a scene of Page, Ellison and Yarde—composers.