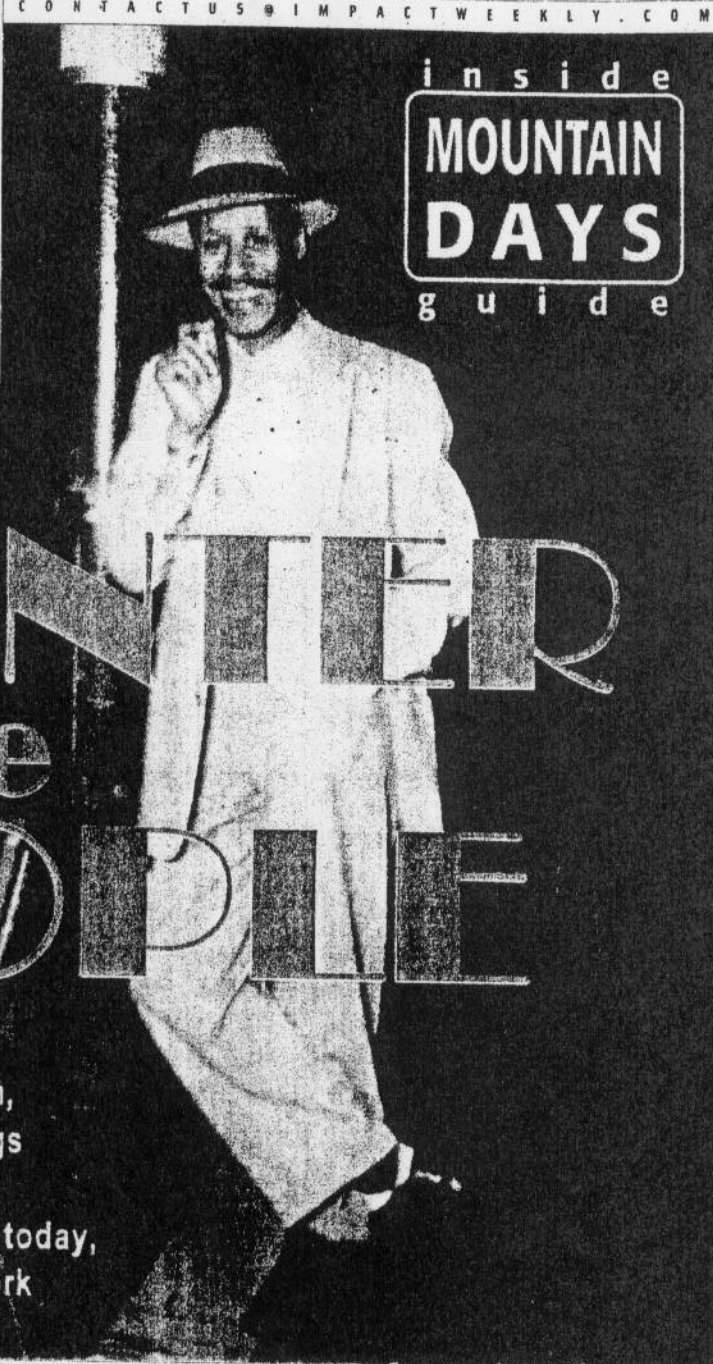


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DAYS**
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a PAINTER for the PEOPLE

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creating renowned paintings
in a style influenced by the
Harlem Renaissance — yet today,
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For nearly half a century, Robert Neal lived in Dayton, creating renowned paintings in a style influenced by the Harlem Renaissance — yet today, few are familiar with his work

a PAINTER for the PEOPLE

By LESLIE BENSON

ON A TEMPERATE DAY like this, it would be easier just to walk the few blocks from West Grand Avenue to the two-story, powder beige- and rust-colored Victorian home on Ferguson Avenue. Rather than driving to master painter Robert Neal's house for their weekly ritual, understudy Michael Sampson decides to stroll the streets of West Dayton, admiring the pastel homes lined in rows.

Sampson reaches the Neal home, knocks on the aged wooden door and greets Alberta Neal, Robert's second wife, in the foyer. Admiring the portrait of a Native American chief, a tribute to Alberta's Sioux ancestors, hanging on the opposing wall, Sampson grasps the smooth, wooden palette Robert Neal had carved as a gift for his favorite student and edges up the squeaky, carpeted stairs to a spare bedroom on the second floor. Sampson passes by oval-framed photographs of proud graduates, grinning girls with their hair pulled back in tight ponytails and young men in U.S. Air Force uniforms and enters the almost bare bedroom that functions as Neal's studio.

During the past four years, Robert Neal has spent countless sessions in this small studio with Sampson, teaching the budding artist to paint still lifes from scratch — just as Neal did with his own mentor, renowned Harlem Renaissance artist Hale Woodruff. Neal takes brushes and paints out of the worn, brown leather bag slung carelessly over his shoulder. He begins instructing Sampson on the proper preparation of his canvas, while debating with the experienced student about their difference of opinion on style. Neal encourages his understudy to let go of structure and paint freely.

TODAY, SAMPSON — who studied under Neal from 1984 until Neal's death in December 1987 — is the public information coordinator at the National Afro-American Museum and Cultural Center. Sampson studied at the Dayton Art Institute as a youngster and took art classes at Tennessee State University during the 1970s, yet it was Neal, Sampson said, who molded him into a mature artist.

"Bob taught me the fundamentals and the intricacies of painting in oils," Sampson said. "He passed on information to me concerning composition, design and the elements of constructing a good underpainting as a basic building block for the finishing stages of a painting. He showed me how to make my colors glow with life. These were the elements that he told me his teacher, master painter Hale Woodruff, taught him in Atlanta.

"He and I shared a special friendship that we began on the first day we met," Sampson continued. "We both respected and enjoyed the same kind of artistic expression. Neal was a realist and had seen his teacher before him travel the distance between representation and abstraction in his work. We both had a healthy respect for the skill that it takes to not only render an object in three-dimensional terms but to represent the spirit of the thing, which can be said to be an abstract concept. Robert told me that I had what it takes to become a formidable painter and directed his efforts to school me to that end. I, in turn, respected him as a man, as an artist and for the unique vision and spirit that he embodied."

That doesn't mean the two were always in agreement, though. "He would tell me, 'When a man studies under another man, he paints like that man until that man's through with him,'" Sampson said. As an example of Sampson's break from his mentor, he began

painting the human form in its natural state, although Neal and a number of African American artists of his time rendered the human figure with elongated limbs. "It's what you exaggerate that sends a message to the viewer: it's a stylish aesthetic that is almost characteristic. However, I wanted to paint in a more realistic, almost photographic style. I eventually found a happy medium between the two."

Yet more than Neal's style and skill, it was his passion that so inspired Sampson.

Neal once told Sampson, "If something moves me and becomes part of me, then I must paint it, because this is the way I express what I want to say best. Through painting, I can take a person a thousand miles away to a place I've been or share an experience I've had or, say, meet someone I've seen. It's a world — the visual arts — it's a world unlike any other. That's why I love it."

Robert L. Neal lived in Dayton from the 1940s until his death. Hale Woodruff trained Neal when he was in his early twenties. From the beginning, Neal was able to skillfully use a spectrum of subdued colors and organic shapes to reflect humanity in moments of anguish and ecstasy, despair and delight.

"Robert Neal, a chosen prophet of artists, could not do anything without a spiritual revelation. He was called to create paintings to help people see things in life just as they are," Alberta Neal said. "I dearly loved him for one thing: He wanted people of all nationalities to join in and admire his artwork. He didn't want anyone to think he was better than them, and he didn't want to be categorized as just a 'black' artist."

Yet today, few people — of any color — are familiar with Neal's work.

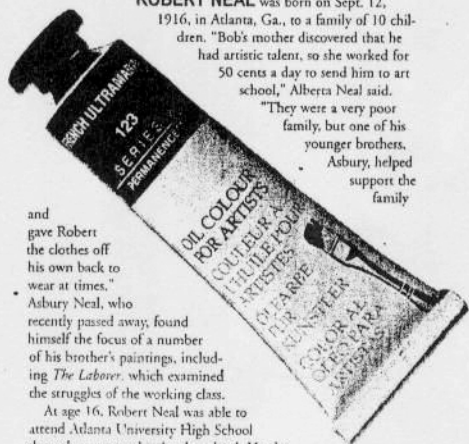
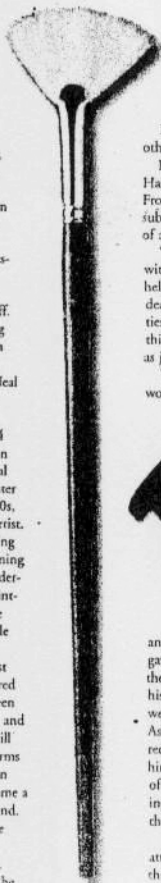
ROBERT NEAL was born on Sept. 12, 1916, in Atlanta, Ga., to a family of 10 children. "Bob's mother discovered that he had artistic talent, so she worked for 50 cents a day to send him to art school," Alberta Neal said.

"They were a very poor family, but one of his younger brothers, Asbury, helped support the family

and gave Robert the clothes off his own back to wear at times."

Asbury Neal, who recently passed away, found himself the focus of a number of his brother's paintings, including *The Laborer*, which examined the struggles of the working class.

At age 16, Robert Neal was able to attend Atlanta University High School through a sponsorship by the school. He also apprenticed privately, along with fellow classmate Frederick Flemister, under Hale Woodruff.



"In a conversation with Woodruff's widow, Dr. Theresa Woodruff, shortly after Bob's death, she revealed to me that Hale considered (Robert Neal) his favorite student," Sampson said.

Neal participated in his first art show when he was 18 years old. "At first, he told Hale that he and his family were so poor that he couldn't enter into the art show," Alberta Neal said. "Mr. Woodruff ended up renting a tuxedo for Bob and sending a limousine to pick him up. He won first place in the show."

For the next six years, the two artists worked closely together and learned from each other's techniques. In the 1930s, Robert Neal graduated from Morehouse College in Atlanta with a bachelor of fine arts degree. His artistic endeavors began with drawing and eventually evolved into tempera, watercolor, block printing and oil painting. Later, Neal experimented with woodcarving and sculpture.

Having exhibited his artwork at Atlanta University in 1937, Neal also entered the 1939 Tri-County Exhibition at the High Art Museum in Atlanta, in which he won second place. That same year, Neal exhibited his work at Dillard University in New Orleans. The following year, he entered the American Negro Exposition in Chicago.

As Woodruff's understudy, Neal also worked on the *Amistad Mutiny* murals, commissioned by Yale University, in 1938. "The murals were done in oil tempera on the walls of the Savery Library at Talladega College in Talladega, Ala. The panels were executed on canvas after a year of careful research and were unveiled on April 15, 1939," Sampson said. "Bob assisted Woodruff with much of the 'cartoon' — as the basic, underlying drawing for the mural was called — and posed for many of the figures in the mural." While working on this project, Woodruff and Neal were mentioned in the books *Negro Art* by Cedric Dover and *The Negro in Art* by philosopher Alain LeRoy Locke.

During this time, Robert Neal was married to his first wife, Betsy. The couple had two children, Robbie Ann and Harold Frederick Neal. The same year Robert Neal began working on the *Amistad Mutiny* project, he painted *The Old Man* to explore himself as he believed he would look in old age. The painting shows a mellow-looking man, lines of wisdom covering his chocolate-colored face, wearing a lopsided hat and an overcoat; a cigarette is dangling from his mouth. As it turned out, Neal's depiction was not far from the truth.

In the 1940s, Neal moved to Dayton to live near his relatives. He found a steady job at Master Electric and later studied oil painting and watercolor under Ed Burroughs at the Dayton Art Institute. Yet it was during these years that Neal divorced his first wife, became discouraged with his artwork and fell into alcoholism.

However, his cousin, Dennis Miller, put in a good word for him at the Mound plant in Miamisburg, and Neal was able to secure a job in the Mimes Laboratory as a technical engineer, handling toxic chemicals used to create the atomic bomb during World War II. He worked there for 16 years.

Neal befriended Alberta Coleman at the former Bluenote Bar on West Third Street, where she worked as a barmaid in the 1960s. Coleman, who was raising children of her own, encouraged Neal to pursue his dream and continue creating art.

"I didn't believe (Robert) was an artist at first, but I eventually found out. There was something



different about his personality than other men," she said. "We were secret friends for 10 years before we got married. Kind of like a psychiatrist — telling each other our problems. ... Bob could see through me. I am what I am because God

hulism. He told me that things just didn't work out with his (first) wife," she continued. "When he first moved in with me, I contacted his children and reunited them with Robert, since he hadn't seen them in eight years. ... I encouraged

Bob not to give away his God-given talent. Love is the answer to all problems, and that's what I did. I sacrificed for him and loved him."

According to Alberta Neal, her husband would "drink a gallon of bourbon and lie on the floor to kill the pain that he felt from the radioactive chemicals he was exposed to at Mound.

"I once told Bob that I was going to go home and stay with Grandmother until he got help for his drinking," she continued. "I was reading my Bible at the dining room table one day, and he walked up and told me that it's time for him to stop drinking. He said, 'I love you better than the bottle.' Then he just gave up drinking. He didn't even go to an AA meeting."



THE ARTIST AT WORK: Robert Neal at the West Dayton YMCA in 1968

made me this way. He thought that my character was nice, and he liked how I raised my children. He saw that I was interested in his artwork, and that threw him.

"When he lost his family, Bob went into alco-

"ROBERT NEAL ... WAS CALLED TO CREATE PAINTINGS TO HELP PEOPLE SEE THINGS IN LIFE JUST AS THEY ARE. I DEARLY LOVED HIM FOR ONE THING: HE WANTED PEOPLE OF ALL NATIONALITIES TO JOIN IN AND ADMIRE HIS ARTWORK. HE DIDN'T WANT ANYONE TO THINK HE WAS BETTER THAN THEM, AND HE DIDN'T WANT TO BE CATEGORIZED AS JUST A 'BLACK' ARTIST."

—ALBERTA NEAL,
ROBERT NEAL'S SECOND WIFE

"IF SOMETHING MOVES ME AND BECOMES PART OF ME, THEN I MUST PAINT IT, BECAUSE THIS IS THE WAY I EXPRESS WHAT I WANT TO SAY BEST. THROUGH PAINTING, I CAN TAKE A PERSON A THOUSAND MILES AWAY TO A PLACE I'VE BEEN OR SHARE AN EXPERIENCE I'VE HAD OR, SAY, MEET SOMEONE I'VE SEEN. IT'S A WORLD — THE VISUAL ARTS — IT'S A WORLD UNLIKE ANY OTHER. THAT'S WHY I LOVE IT."

—ROBERT NEAL

"ROBERT'S WORK IS UNIQUE IN THAT IT SPEAKS TO US OF A PARTICULAR TIME PERIOD, DOCUMENTS WHAT WAS GOING ON DURING THE PERIOD AND DOES IT IN AN ELOQUENT AND EXCITING MANNER."

—MICHAEL SAMPSON,
PUBLIC INFORMATION
COORDINATOR AT THE
NATIONAL AFRO-AMERICAN
MUSEUM AND CULTURAL
CENTER AND FORMER
STUDENT OF ROBERT NEAL

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IN 1962, oil painter Curtis Barnes, who would later work as a professor of fine arts at Sinclair Community College, arrived in Dayton and visited an exhibition that featured art by Martha Shields, William Patterson and Robert Neal. "These artists used an expressive style and a subject matter that was reflective of the 1930s and '40s," Barnes said. "Robert's work blew me away."

Willis "Bing" Davis, who would later become the artist-in-residence at the School of Education at the University of Dayton and a visiting scholar at Wright State University, ran into Neal at the first Kuzalewu Festival, the forerunner to the Dayton Black Festival, in the mid-'60s. "We met at the Burkam playground, where we exhibited works on the tennis court wire fence," Davis said. The free cultural event ran on a \$500 budget and enabled local artists and performers to exhibit their works.

Following the 1966 festival, Neal completed his most beloved painting, *My Thing*. "Everything he dealt with in everyday life is in that painting," Alberta Neal said.

The still life displays a picturesque flower vase, beside a dirty painter's palette, a pistol in its sheath, a box of matches and a fresh gourd. Seemingly disparate objects are cleverly linked through Neal's use of richly toned autumn colors — golds, reds, browns and oranges. His family eventually donated the painting to Wilberforce University at the request of Neal before his death.

Alberta Coleman and Robert Neal were married in 1977, creating a large family of children, which included Lennie, Jonathan and Terry Smith, as well as Robbie Ann, Harold Frederick "Fred Jr.," Phillis and Richard Neal. According to Alberta, Robert's paintings were also like his children — invaluable to him. Former President of Central State University Dr. Art Thomas purchased *The Landscape of Georgia* for \$1,200, which became a part of his private collection; however, the majority of Robert Neal's artwork has not been released for sale.

In 1982, Barnes eventually met the artist who had "blown him away." Barnes was co-chair of the Dayton chapter of the National Conference of Artists (NCA), an organization created to unite African American visual artists in exhibition and education. The Dayton chapter had 20 members who were interested in preserving the African American style of art through seminars and workshops in which artists could exchange ideas. Neal was active in the organization from 1982 until his death. Barnes, who was also born and raised in the Atlanta area, shared a friendship with Neal because of their similar backgrounds, mutual love of painting and involvement in the NCA. Three years later, Bing Davis served as national president of the organization.

"The NCA held its first international conference and exhibit in Dakar, Senegal, in West Africa to convene with African artists and scholars. We explored and discussed the impact of the Harlem Renaissance and negritude on contemporary African American art and artists," Davis said. "The international art exhibit at the National Museum of Senegal included artwork of three artists from Dayton — Robert Neal, Curtis Barnes and myself. The conference proved to be an important milestone in African American art in America and is still studied and discussed today. Robert Neal's work *The Landscape of Georgia* was well received and highly praised at the exhibition."

"Robert's meticulous attention to detail reflected a very clear understanding of social commentary and the scientific community," Barnes said. "His technique and expression, what he was trying to say and how he said it, influenced other members of the NCA."

In the mid-1980s, Barnes bought Neal a roll of canvas, and in return, Neal gave him *The Conspirators*, an oil painting done in earth tones that depicts three male figures standing around a table

desert plateau alongside maroon blossoms and shrubbery, a sign of the circle of life stemming out of decay. It is this same outlook on life that allowed Robert Neal to stay positive during the last years of his life and continue painting until a year before his death. According to Alberta Neal, "Bob had seven paintings when we got married, but by the time that he passed away, he had completed 56."

Neal spent his life dedicated to creating African American-style paintings, woodcarvings and sculptures inspired by spiritual and personal experiences as well as political and social events. His paintings reflect humanity in moments of greatness and tragedy, while his oil landscapes feature simple, earthy backgrounds of subdued blue skies, calm plains, wispy mountains, foggy cliffs, hills of red clay and trees reaching for the heavens.

"Robert's work is unique in that it speaks to us of a particular time period, documents what was going on during the period and does it in an eloquent and exciting manner," Sampson said. Neal's work exaggerates the human form to a slight degree, reminiscent of other African American artists of the Works Progress Administration (WPA), a federal project set up during the 1930s by the administration of President Franklin D. Roosevelt to hire artists who were unemployed due to the Great Depression.

"There was a certain style of art that came from artists during that time," Sampson said. "Bob had that same flavor."

Art historians have also classified Neal with the "Outhouse School" of art. His artistic style featured images of rural life in the South: old shotgun houses, outhouses, cotton pickers and laborers. His work also included images of everyday African American life, Biblical allegories, Native Americans, the homeless, street scenes, portraits and still lifes.

"Robert's art had a unique, visual appeal because of his strong old-school approach to painting and 'subject matter,'" Davis said. "He took great care in sketching out and designing each composition to make sure it revealed what he wanted the viewer to see. Then he used a solid painting technique that required complex underpainting — slowly building up his surface until it was rich in color and form. His selection of urban and rural subjects had a timeless visual appeal that pulls the viewer into the artwork."

"Robert's work established a historical reference that reflects events of the 1930s and '40s, especially with the WPA," Barnes said. "It was because of these historical references that Robert's work was attached to a particular era." Barnes believes Robert's rhythm bore marked similarities to that of the late Thomas Heart Benton, another Harlem Renaissance painter who treated form and composition with an organic style.

The Harlem Renaissance, or the Black Arts Movement, of the 1920s was an era defined by the search for the severed cultural link to Africa by black artists, performers and scholars. Although high concentrations of artists and writers living during this time worked in Harlem, the rebirth occurred in black communities all over the country.

One of the most famous visual artists of the Harlem Renaissance, Woodruff taught in the art department at Adanta University and initiated the Atlanta Annuals, competitive exhibitions of art by African American artists. While in Atlanta, Woodruff taught Neal the rich style of those African American artists active with the WPA and the Harlem Renaissance.

Mexican muralists inspired Woodruff's artistic style while he worked on the frescoes with Diego Rivera in 1936 and later created Southern regionalist images, including lynching scenes in the Georgia countryside. Woodruff's *Return Home* (1935) expresses his outrage over the poor housing establishments that were forced upon African Americans due to discrimination.

In the midst of all of the friendly banter between he and Neal during their sessions together, Woodruff passed down stories about his Guggenheim Fellowship in Paris, France, where he received instruction from Pablo Picasso at the Louvre. Neal, in turn, relayed these stories to Sampson.

"Woodruff had told Robert that in Paris, students were not allowed to bring their paints or brushes to class," Sampson said. "Picasso would lecture, and they were only allowed to take notes. Woodruff survived his fellowship on French breadsticks and wine, since he was not flushed with money in the 1930s."

Woodruff's attention to detail and faithful depiction of the African American experience influenced Robert Neal's artistic style, helping him to create paintings such as *Letter from Vietnam* (1985), which portrays a black woman reading a letter in her kitchen. She is crying because she has just learned that her son has been killed in the war. In the background, the postman can be seen walking away. "It was a painting symptomatic of the times," Sampson said.

Neal frequently addressed social issues in his artwork. *The Agony in Ethiopia* (1983) uses the body of his second wife, Alberta, as a basis for the female form, relaying the image of a once-beautiful African woman falling into depression and starvation as she meets a determined vulture waiting eagerly for her demise.

"During the 1980s, there were all kinds of images that were broadcast to us in the United States about the famine in Ethiopia," Sampson said. "Children were dying, and mothers were almost helpless to feed the children with bloated stomachs. In *The Agony in Ethiopia*, Neal depicted a woman with shallow eyes who was starving. He did a number of pieces based on that topic. It was a topic that was close to his heart."

SAMPSON IS CURRENTLY proposing an exhibition of Robert Neal's work to the National Afro-American Museum and Cultural Center, which explores such topics as quiltmaking traditions, the relationship between blacks and Jews, the Civil Rights Movement. Dayton's funk music heritage, and a host of aspects of African American culture. As the manager of Robert Neal's artwork, Sampson is also interested in organizing one-man exhibitions of Neal's work at Wilberforce University and the Dayton Art Institute.

"Living in Dayton during a time when few were knowledgeable of black art or artists, Neal was an anomaly — a visionary treasure living among us," Sampson said. "How many youngsters have the opportunity to grow up with a true artist in their midst to inspire and encourage them? How many adults have significant contact with the men and women who dedicate their lives to artistic endeavor? We all were blessed to have had Robert Neal living among us in Dayton. It is now up to us to make certain that his lively spirit, most easily discovered in his art, continues to survive in our hearts."

"During Robert's life, we talked often about 'The Big Three' Dayton African American artists — Robert 'Bob' McGuire, William 'Pat' Patterson and Martha Drew Shields — that were an inspiration to us developing young artists," Davis said. "Since Robert's death, he joins this group of inspiring artists."

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PHOTO BY G.D. TAYLOR

MOLDED BY A MASTER: Michael Sampson, now the public information coordinator at the National Afro-American Museum and Cultural Center, studied under Robert Neal from 1984 until Neal's death in December 1987. Sampson studied at the Dayton Art Institute as a youngster and took art classes at Tennessee State University during the 1970s, yet it was Neal, Sampson said, who molded him into a mature artist.

in conversation. "It represented the style and rhythm that Robert was so involved with throughout his career," Barnes said.

The painting flows with an almost organic, biomorphic rhythm. In the 1930s and '40s, artists painted shapes and forms, including landscapes and figures, in a rolling, fluid way. Similar to drapery, Neal's paintings also depicted the subject matter in a continuous form throughout the composition.

Along with working as an oil painter and woodcarver, Neal was a linoprinter who carved images into linoleum and printed them. "He wasn't a one-dimensional person," Barnes said. Neal's background in the Harlem Renaissance was an important backdrop for his later work, when he experimented with a more contemporary artistic style. "Toward the latter part of his life, he used brighter color, more modern and abstract forms," Barnes added. "But his earlier biomorphic rhythm was really his soul, not the modern work."

ONE YEAR AFTER doctors at Grandview Hospital discovered that Robert Neal had cancer of the mouth and gave him five years to live, in 1983, he painted *Butter and Cheese Line*, a simple scene relaying an event from the 1970s, when people of different nationalities crammed together in a line to wait for handouts of household commodities. He and Alberta Neal actually stood in such a line.

That same year, he painted *The Skull of Philadelphia*, which depicts a buffalo skull on a