

# The Art of Romare Bearden

A Resource for Teachers



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Cover: *Tomorrow I May Be Far Away*, 1966/1967, collage of various papers with charcoal and graphite on canvas, 46 x 56 in. National Gallery of Art, Washington, Paul Mellon Fund

Title page: *Thank you...For F.U.M.L. (Funking Up My Life)* detail, 1978, collage of various papers with ink and graphite on fiberboard, 15 x 18<sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub>, Donald Byrd

Back cover: *The Street*, 1964, collage of various papers on cardboard, 9<sup>5</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 11<sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub> in. Milwaukee Art Museum, gift of Friends of Art and the African American Art Acquisition Fund

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Booker Museum at St Albans & Bolton



Pablo Picasso, wearing his hat in 1901, London



... of Cézanne  
... They w  
... in 1900  
... and A  
... re  
... in 1911, C  
... for a  
... drawing  
... was read  
... He  
... before a



These are some of the cards, but the  
rest are in the book. They are  
from the 'Carnet de la Tour de France' and other  
works.

### CARTES DES PROVINGES FRANÇAISES

Les cartes de France  
sont divisées en  
régions, provinces  
et pays. Elles sont  
trouvées dans les  
livres de cartes  
françaises.



These are some of the  
works of the artist  
in the book.



# The Art of Romare Bearden

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## Objectives

The materials in this packet will help students learn the following about Romare Bearden:

- Bearden used personal memories, African-American cultural history, and literature as the source of his subject matter. He placed aspects of African-American life within the context of universal themes.
- Bearden's style was influenced by numerous sources, including Western European art, African sculpture, the art of his contemporaries in America and Mexico, and music—especially blues and jazz.
- Bearden is most famous for his work in collage, which he used in unique and innovative ways. He also made paintings in watercolor, gouache, and oil, edition prints, monotypes, murals, and one assemblage sculpture.
- Through his involvement with the arts community, Bearden empowered and promoted artists of color.

## How to Use this Packet

This packet includes slides, color reproductions, transparencies, and a music CD. Some images exist in all three forms, to offer maximum flexibility.

- Slides follow the order in which they appear in the text.
- Transparencies are keyed to ACTIVITIES.
- Color reproductions are for classroom display.
- The Branford Marsalis Quartet CD, *Romare Bearden Revealed*, complements the packet's section on music.

Opposite: Cut magazine images from Bearden's studio

Cover: Detail of work on page 46





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courtesy of the Romare Bearden  
Foundation, New York, photo:  
Blaine Waller, copy photograph  
by Beckett Logan

# Bearden at a Glance





## Bearden at a Glance

*“I think the artist has to be something like a whale, swimming with his mouth wide open, absorbing everything until he has what he really needs. When he finds that, he can start to make limitations. And then he really begins to grow.”*

Bearden loved his cats: Gypo, Tuttle (short for the Egyptian pharaoh Tutankhamen), Rusty (named after the Persian Hercules Rustum), and Mikie (short for the Renaissance artist Michelangelo).



Meet Romare Bearden. He was 5 feet 11 inches tall and heavysset. His friends called him Romie. After graduating from college, he had a career as a social worker while becoming one of the preeminent artists in the United States from the mid 1960s until his death in 1988.

Previous page and opposite: Bearden and his cat Gypo, mid-1970s. Estate of Romare Bearden, courtesy of the Romare Bearden Foundation, New York. Both photos: Nancy Crampton

Bearden’s art transcends categories because it joins the imagery of black life and circumstance to universally understood experience. This is the essence of Bearden’s contribution.

Having grown up in a house where Harlem Renaissance luminaries like poet Langston Hughes were regular visitors, it is no surprise that adult Bearden read all the time: poetry, philosophy, politics, works about myth, religion and art, and ancient literature. He also read contemporary writers and intellectuals, many of them personal friends, including Richard Wright, James Baldwin, and Albert Murray.



Cut magazine images from Bearden’s studio

Jazz and the blues provided Bearden with many subjects. He grew up hearing rural blues and uptown jazz: Duke Ellington's orchestra, Earl Hines' piano, Ella Fitzgerald's scat singing. For sixteen years, his studio was above the Apollo Theatre, still a Harlem musical landmark.

Bearden didn't just read. He also wrote—exhibition reviews, articles about his own working methods and artistic ideas, and three book-length studies, *The Painter's Mind* (1953), *Six Black Masters of American Art* (1972), and *A History of African-American Artists: From 1792 to the Present* (1993, posthumously).



Duke Ellington conducting from the piano, 1943.  
Library of Congress, photo: Gordon Parks



Bearden working in his Long Island City studio, early 1980s, photo: Frank Stewart

Bearden's signature technique was collage. Snippets from magazine photographs, painted papers, foil, posters, and art reproductions were among his materials. They were his "paints." Bearden's collages fractured space and form, leading one writer to describe them as "patchwork cubism."





*Of the Blues: Mecklenburg Co., Saturday Night* (detail), 1974, collage of various papers with paint, ink, graphite, and surface abrasion on fiberboard, 50 1/2 x 44 1/4 in. Mr. and Mrs. Douglas Houchens

Harlem, New York City, center of black culture, where he moved as a toddler.

*Profile/Part II, The Thirties: Midtown Sunset* (detail), 1981, collage of various papers with paint and bleached areas on fiberboard, 14 x 22 in. Private collection

**The Places Bearden Painted**

Rural North Carolina, where he was born and later visited repeatedly.



Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, steel industry town where he spent summers and one high school year, and was inspired to draw for the first time.

*Pittsburgh* (detail), 1965, collage of various papers with ink on cardboard, 6 1/4 x 8 3/4 in. Harry Henderson



**The Subjects Bearden Painted**

African-American life and traditions  
 Stories from religion, history, literature, and myth  
 Blues singers and jazz players

*Untitled (Prevalence of Ritual)*, c. 1971, collage of various papers with fabric, ink and surface abrasion on fiberboard, 27 3/4 x 20 7/8. From the Collection of Raymond J. McGuire



St. Martin, the Caribbean island where, as a mature artist, he lived and worked part of the year.

Romare Bearden Foundation, New York, photo: Frank Stewart

Be on the lookout for these:

- Trains
- Spirit Figures (Conjurers)
- Rural shacks
- Row houses and stoops
- Large hands
- Birds
- Musicians
- Windows
- Hills
- African sculpture
- Smokestacks
- Sun and Moon
- Cats
- Roosters



### Bearden's Techniques

- Watercolor
- Gouache
- Collage
- Collage, photostatically enlarged in black and white
- Edition Prints
- Monotypes
- Oils
- And One Sculpture!

### Bearden's Other Projects

- Illustrations for Books
- Record Album Covers
- Stage Sets and Costumes
- Public Murals

Bearden was committed to improving the standing of African-American artists. Critical of special or separate treatment for African-American artists, he was nevertheless aware of their limited opportunities. Bearden made important commitments to leveling the playing field for black artists.

*"...we, as Negroes, could not fail to be touched by the outrage of segregation..." (from the catalogue of the first Spiral Group exhibition, 1965)*

*Conjur: A Masked Folk Ballet [Sunlight], c. 1970, collage of various papers with watercolor, gouache, ink and graphite on paper, 17 x 13 in. Courtesy of Ekstrom & Ekstrom, Inc., New York*

This is one of fourteen costume designs for a ballet Bearden conceptualized.



# Biography





## Biography

Romare Bearden (1911–1988)

*“From far off some people that  
I have seen and remembered  
have come into the landscape....  
Sometimes the mind relives  
things very clearly for us. Often  
you have no choice in dealing  
with this kind of sensation, things  
are just there.... There are roads  
out of the secret places within  
us along which we all must move  
as we go to touch others.”*

Born in Charlotte, North Carolina, the seat of Mecklenburg County, on September 2, 1911, Romare Bearden grew up in a middle-class African-American family. His parents Bessye and Howard were both college-educated, and it was expected that Romare would achieve success in life. About 1914, his family joined the Great Migration of southern blacks to points north and west. In the early twentieth century, jim crow laws kept many blacks from voting and from equal access to jobs, education, health care, business, land, and more. Like many southern black families, the Beardens settled in the Harlem section of New York City. Romare would call New York home for the rest of his life.

In the 1920s, Harlem was a rich and vibrant center of cultural and intellectual growth and the focal point of African-American culture. Romare’s mother was the New York editor of the *Chicago Defender*, a widely read African-American weekly newspaper, and became a prominent social and political figure in Harlem. Duke Ellington, Langston Hughes, and other well-known artists, writers, and musicians were frequent visitors to the Bearden family home. Such social and intellectual gatherings would become a mainstay in Romare’s life. Also, his encounters with these legendary talents must have fostered his lifelong interest in jazz and literature.



Bearden family photograph. Estate of Romare Bearden, courtesy of the Romare Bearden Foundation, New York. Previous page: detail of Romare Bearden



## SLIDE 1

*Profile/Part I, The Twenties: Pittsburgh Memories, Farewell Eugene*, 1978, collage of various papers with paint, ink, graphite, and bleached areas on fiberboard, 16<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 20<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> in. Laura Grosch and Herb Jackson

Throughout his childhood, Bearden spent time away from Harlem, staying most often with relatives in Mecklenburg County and Pittsburgh. His memory of these experiences, as well as African-American cultural history, would become the subjects of many of his works. Trains, roosters, cats, landscapes, barns, and shingled shacks reflected the rural landscape of his early childhood and summer vacations. Scenes of his grandparents' boardinghouse, bellowing steel mills, and African-American mill workers recalled his Pittsburgh memories.

Bearden attributed his early artistic ambition to a childhood friend in Pittsburgh. There, a boy named Eugene introduced Romare to the drawings he made of the brothel where he lived with his mother. When Romare's grandmother saw the drawings and learned about Eugene's circumstances, she immediately brought the boy to live with her at the boardinghouse. Sadly, Eugene died about a year later. More than fifty years after Eugene's death, Bearden would pay tribute to this early formative experience.

Another early source of inspiration for the artist was his encounter with the sculptor Augusta Savage, with whom he spent time as a teenager. In Bearden's words, she was "a flesh and blood artist with a studio which we were welcome to use as a workshop, or even just to hang out in. She was open, free, resisted the usual conventions of the time, and lived for her art, thinking of success only in terms of how well her sculptures turned out."

In 1935 Bearden graduated from New York University with a degree in education and took night classes led by German artist George Grosz, at the Art Students League. That same year, he also became a caseworker for the New York City Department of Social Services. Bearden would not completely retire from this position until 1969, spending a portion of his career working with newly emigrated gypsies from Eastern Europe.



*Pittsburgh Memories* (detail), 1984, collage of various papers with fabric, foil, paint, ink, color pencil, graphite, and bleached areas on fiberboard, 28<sup>5</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 23<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> in. Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh; gift of Mr. and Mrs. Ronald R. Davenport and Mr. and Mrs. Milton A. Washington, 1984





## SLIDE 2

*Now the Dove and the Leopard Wrestle*, 1946, oil on canvas, 23 1/2 x 29 1/4 in. Clements Library, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor

Bearden's early images, made in the late 1940s, present subjects from his wide-ranging interest in literature and religion. He treated the Passion of Christ, Federico García Lorca's poem "Lament for a Bullfighter," François Rabelais' social satire *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, and Homer's epics. Stylistically, these works are abstract and figural, gestural and brightly colored. The images are recognizable but fractured, rotated, and boldly outlined.

From 1942 to 1945 Bearden served in the United States Army. In 1950, supported by the GI Bill, he traveled to Paris and studied at the Sorbonne. He also visited Italy and Spain. Throughout his career as an artist, Bearden would seek inspiration from and intellectual engagement with the masters, past and present, of European art. Duccio, Giotto, Picasso, and Matisse are among the artists he studied and admired. Other important artistic sources included African art, Chinese landscapes, and the work of his contemporaries in the United States and Mexico. Bearden was constantly processing new sources of information—art, books, and life—which in turn enriched his work.



Romare and Nanette Bearden, 1958. Estate of Romare Bearden, courtesy of the Romare Bearden Foundation, New York

When Bearden returned from Europe to New York, his art career stalled, and he became a successful professional songwriter for a few years. In 1954 he married Nanette Rohan, a dancer and choreographer born on Staten Island in New York, with family origins in the Caribbean island of St. Martin. Friends had been pressing Bearden to return more fully to art, and eventually he did, dedicating himself to the systematic study of the old masters for three years.

Bearden became an increasingly involved artist and art activist. In 1963 he became a founder of Spiral, a group of African-American artists who met to discuss what their commitment to the civil rights movement could be. Bearden thought it might be a good idea if they created a work of art collectively, perhaps using collage. He came to the next meeting with materials in hand to begin the project, but no one seemed very interested. Bearden, however, was intrigued and began to create his own collages.

Bearden's early collages were composed primarily of magazine and newspaper cuttings. Along with his *Projections*, which were enlarged photostatic copies of these collages, they mark a turning point in his career and received critical praise. In style and technique Bearden's work was never static—it was always evolving. Over the next thirty years, Bearden's collages employed not only flat areas of color defined by cut papers, and patterned or textured areas created by cuttings of preprinted images and hand-painted papers, but also foils and fabrics. Surface manipulation was another ongoing concern for the artist, who explored new ways to rework his paper and painted surfaces, including the use of bleach or peroxide, sandpaper, and perhaps even an electric eraser.

Although Bearden is best known for his work in collage, which is also the focus of this text, he achieved success in a wide array of media and techniques, including watercolor, gouache, oil, drawing, monotype, and edition prints. He also made designs for record albums, costumes and stage sets, book illustration, and one known assemblage wood sculpture.

Throughout his life, Bearden gave back to the African-American arts community as well as the art world at large. He wrote scholarly articles and treatises on art and art history, including *A Painter's Mind: A Study of the Relations of Structure and Space in Painting* with the painter Carl Holty (1969), and *A History of African-American Artists: From 1792 to the Present* with journalist Harry Henderson and published posthumously (1993). As an advocate and promoter of numerous artists, he also organized several group exhibitions and cofounded the Cinque Gallery, an art space named after the leader of the *Amistad* mutiny of 1839 and dedicated to young minority artists in need of exhibition opportunities. Bearden also help found the Studio Museum in Harlem (1968).



Bearden at work. Estate of Romare Bearden, courtesy of the Romare Bearden Foundation, New York

Paper from Bearden's studio



In *Tomorrow I May Be Far Away*, Bearden reflects on his childhood memories of Mecklenburg County. A focus or elevation of the everyday becomes a frequent motif in many of his works.

The background is a wall from a shingled wooden shack or barn, reminiscent of buildings Bearden would have seen in Mecklenburg County.

Windowscapes seem like pictures within pictures.

Perhaps wrapping paper or wallpaper

Hands are made from various magazine sources. Abrupt changes in color, size, and texture capture your attention, making the hands a focal point of the collage.

For the seated figure's face, Bearden used as many as fifteen different magazine cuttings. Because they came from many different sources, the scale, color, and points of view shift.

Many cuttings are from magazines or catalogues of wood samples. No two pieces seem exactly alike.

Hand-painted paper







The train, one of several “journeying things,” recurs in Bearden’s work—a memory from the artist’s youth in rural North Carolina and a symbol of the Underground Railroad and the northern migration of African Americans from the South during the early part of the twentieth century.

Bearden often worked in a variety of collage media and then added graphite, charcoal, spray paint, watercolor, oil, and more. This section was probably spray painted.

A cabin in the woods—more Mecklenburg memories

A lush landscape made from magazine cuttings

Bearden studied art history, visited museums, and collected reproductions of famous works of art. This piece of collage is a cutting from a reproduction of Henri Rousseau’s painting, *The Dream*, 1910, in the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

Birds and barnyard fowl appear often.

The female figure in profile holding a watermelon wears a traditional early twentieth-century farm costume with a long skirt and head scarf.

The rustic wooden fence, a recurring farm motif, helps divide space.

### SLIDE 3

*Tomorrow I May Be Far Away*, 1966/1967, collage of various papers with charcoal and graphite on canvas, 46 x 56 in. National Gallery of Art, Washington, Paul Mellon Fund



## Activity: Scrutinize a Bearden Collage

TRANSPARENCY 1 OR SLIDE 3



TRANSPARENCY 1 OR SLIDE 3

*Tomorrow I May Be Far Away*

Lead a discussion of *Tomorrow I May Be Far Away* using information about the work in the diagram on pages 18 and 19.

Look carefully. What is going on in this work of art?

What is the first thing that catches your eye, and why?

Bearden used many different collage materials in his works, including cuttings from newspapers, magazines, sample catalogues, painted papers, colored paper, foil, wallpaper, wrapping paper, and art reproductions. What materials did he use in *Tomorrow I May Be Far Away*?

Describe the setting. The three people are probably on a farm. How can you tell that they are in the country and not the city?

Imagine what the man in the center is thinking. What do you think happened right before he sat down? What do you think will happen next?

How would you describe the mood of this collage (quiet, still, thoughtful, expectant)?

Would you like to visit this place? Why or why not?

If you could ask the artist one question about this work, what would it be?

In *Profile/Part I, The Twenties: Pittsburgh Memories, Farewell Eugene*, Bearden remembers the passing of a childhood friend. He also wrote a poem in memory of young Eugene. Compare Bearden's collage to the poem, especially visual imagery and mood.

Ask students to write a poem of their own, inspired by one of the reproductions from this packet. Students should consider the picture's subject and think about ways to make connections to the visual imagery with words.



TRANSPARENCY 2 OR SLIDE 1

*Profile/Part I, The Twenties: Pittsburgh Memories, Farewell Eugene*

## Farewell to Eugene

Why do you leave me  
and for that broken bone  
    in your soul, so now  
the oscillating beacon of  
    memory that sweeps a sea of time  
is blurred by fog  
    and I see only those buds  
which follow you, but  
when I try to reach them,  
they disappear in the silence.  
Nothing like this was necessary  
    Eugene  
I stand here among these tombs,  
Holding this flower  
Which will fall endlessly into this  
open earth  
that rejects nothing.

---

I forbid you to completely leave me  
    even if I must journey  
through the mist of years  
to where breakers fall on unknown  
    shores.

I will do so, again and  
again, Eugene  
Until I find you and ask  
Why you had to leave.

# Memories







#### SLIDE 4

*Watching the Good Trains Go By*, 1964, collage of various papers with ink on cardboard, 13<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 16<sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub> in. The Collection of Philip J. and Suzanne Schiller, American Social Commentary Art 1930–1970

Previous page: detail of photograph on page 28

In order to “possess the meaning of his southern childhood and northern upbringing,” Romare Bearden made art from observation and memory—the sights, sounds, and feelings of his personal history. One of his profound gifts to us was a new generation of images—almost nonexistent in American art before him—that measures life’s universal journey in terms of authentic black experience.

#### North Carolina

*“I never left Charlotte except physically.”*

Bearden’s images abound with affection for his birthplace in the South. Charlotte, North Carolina, was a hub for railroads—the Piedmont and Northern, and the Southern Railway lines ran through the city. Train tracks were only a few blocks from the houses of the Bearden family. Beyond was countryside, cotton and farm fields. Church-going, quilting, and other community activities were etched permanently in Bearden’s recollections from summer visits. Among his vivid memories:

- women carrying on daily chores, mothering, nurturing
- church picnics and rituals of faith
- spiritual healers, called conjure women, respected and feared for their powers
- shacks, farm animals, fences, outdoor wash tubs
- working the fields, men in hats and women in headscarves
- southern blues music
- trains

Piedmont and Northern electric engine.  
Photograph courtesy Greenville chapter,  
National Railway Historical Society



## SLIDE 5

*Madeline Jones' Wonderful Garden*, 1977, collage of various papers with ink, graphite, and surface abrasion on fiberboard, 13½ x 16 in. Frederick L. Brown



Sometimes I remember my  
grandfather's house  
A garden with tiger lilies,  
my grandmother  
Waving a white apron to  
passing trains  
On that trestle across the  
clay road.

—from “Sometimes,” a poem by Bearden  
(published in *Romare Bearden in Black and White: Photomontage Projections*, 1964)

For Bearden, trains were weighted symbols. They signified the black migration North after slavery. They clocked time as they rolled and whistled by on their various scheduled routes. They hauled materials from the steel yard. They provided blacks with jobs.

Conjure women were important members of their communities—and not unique to the South. They prepared love potions and herbal remedies and counseled those with family problems. The conjure woman was a conduit of traditional wisdom from Africa. After Bearden began spending time each year in the Caribbean, he studied the island's equivalent Obeah woman, who, like the conjure woman, had the roots of her magic in African culture.



## SLIDE 6

*Prevalence of Ritual: Conjur Woman*, 1964, collage of various papers with foil, ink, and graphite on cardboard, 9¾ x 7¼ in. Anonymous lender



Romare Bearden, first page, "The Negro in 'Little Steel'" *Opportunity: Journal of Negro Life* 15 (Dec. 1937): 362. Romare Bearden Foundation, New York. Permission of National Urban League



Pittsburgh, 1938. Library of Congress, photo: Arthur Rothstein

## Pittsburgh

As a youth in the 1920s, Bearden lived periodically in Pittsburgh with his maternal grandparents, who had a boarding house near the steel mills. Bearden found the steel mills "fascinating." At sixteen, in the summer of 1927, he worked the night shift at U.S. Steel, and later he wrote about the condition of blacks in the steel industry. Bearden's re-creations of his memories of Pittsburgh often include the essentials of working-class life that he observed:

- apartment block housing
- a horizon of smoke stacks, belching steam and flames
- the steel worker, on his way to or from a shift
- scaffolding, hooks, and pulleys from steel and bolt factories
- trains, hauling steel and bringing blacks north for industrial jobs

In the summer of 1936 Bearden interviewed steel workers at Ohio and Pennsylvania plants, just as the steel industry was unionizing. His view of black steel workers—often stuck in menial jobs and at risk of discrimination regardless of union membership—was published in the December 1937 issue of the magazine *Opportunity: Journal of Negro Life*.

Many blacks migrated from the South for industrial jobs in northern cities such as Pittsburgh, and Bearden's grandparents rented rooms to them. This collage recalls the essence of life in their boardinghouse.

- At left, a mill worker leaves for his shift, lunch bucket (made of crumpled foil) in hand.
- Inside, front and center, is a warmly lit room, where Bearden remembered his grandmother "rubbing new boarders with cocoa butter. They didn't realize, when they first started, the terrific heat from those furnaces....the flames would lick out and scorch them." The life was hard, but the workers were making "a tremendous wage...."
- Around the house are signs of "steel" scaffolding, a pulley, smokestacks, belching steam and fire.



### SLIDE 7

*Pittsburgh Memories*, 1984, collage of various papers with fabric, foil, paint, ink, color pencil, graphite, and bleached areas on fiberboard, 28<sup>5</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 23<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> in. Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh; gift of Mr. and Mrs. Ronald R. Davenport and Mr. and Mrs. Milton A. Washington, 1984





Harlem tenement houses,  
1943. Library of Congress

## Harlem

It wasn't New York City, the place alone, that shaped Bearden as an artist, but the combination of that extraordinary metropolis with Bearden's intellect and energy. Harlem was the center of black intellectual life in the United States, and Bearden became a fixture among its well-known intellectuals, artists, and musicians. Harlem's famous jazz and blues clubs were nearby, including the Apollo Theatre—above which Bearden had a studio for sixteen years. The everyday and nights of Harlem, noteworthy as well as mundane, were Bearden subjects. He saw the parallels between the South and Harlem, where similar rituals and habits prevailed.

A voracious reader, Bearden tapped into the mythic and biblical associations of his experiences, presenting black life in a universal context. Mother and child, a sacred bond in all races and times, express the Christian model of Mary with baby Jesus.



*Mother and Child*, c. 1972, collage of various papers with ink and graphite on fiberboard, 13<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 11<sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub> in. Peg Alston



*The Block II* (detail), 1972, collage of various papers with foil, paint, ink, graphite, and surface abrasion on seventeen fiberboard and plywood panels including two applied in relief and one recessed, 25<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> x 74 in. The Walter O. Evans Collection of African American Art

“So much of life was lived out in the open, on the street....” Bearden recalled. With views into buildings on a Harlem block, daily rituals are revealed. One mother fixes a meal, another holds her baby. Friends visit. A man sits on a stoop (stair). Life—black life—takes center stage through the eyes of a fellow African American, revealing, as Ralph Ellison described “a world long hidden by the clichés of sociology....”





Americans in Paris at the Café de Flore (with Bearden wearing hat). Romare Bearden Foundation, New York, photo: Morgan and Marvin Smith

## Paris

Bearden spent about seven months in Paris in 1950. He was so taken with the city that he did not visit museums but instead, absorbed Parisian life. He studied philosophy at the Sorbonne, began friendships with African-American writers James Baldwin and Richard Wright, and met several French artists, including cubist painter Georges Braque and sculptor Constantin Brancusi. At the end of his visit Bearden did not want to leave. His friend, the cultural critic, essayist, and novelist Albert Murray, said, “Romie spent the whole day buying paper...all kinds of drawing papers—rice papers, special sizes and surfaces, different colors. His eyes got more and more moist the later it got.” One reason Bearden turned to songwriting in the 1950s was in hopes of raising funds for a return to Paris.

## The Caribbean

In 1973 Bearden and his wife Nanette built a house on the Caribbean island of St. Martin, Antilles, Nanette’s ancestral home. The house sat near a mountain. Bearden described it as “a 2,500 foot green fountain of splashing, cascading elephant ears, wild orchids, avocados, and bamboo canes...rising out of the sea...”

The island’s lush landscape—with woodlands, rocky precipices, pools of water, and panoramic ocean views—joined Bearden’s repertoire of subjects. He was particularly sensitive to the brilliant effects of island sunlight on nature.

Bearden was skilled at identifying continuity among cultures. Echoing his images of the African-American conjure women, are those he made of the island Obeah woman, who “thought she made the sun rise....” The spirit figure’s blend of intuition, magic, and ancient rites manifests what Bearden called the “prevalence of ritual.”





### SLIDE 9

*In a Green Shade* (Homage [sic] to Marvell), 1984, collage of various papers with paint, ink, and graphite on fiberboard, 39<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 30<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> in. Yvonne and Richard McCracken

In this intimate view of an island pool, intense hues of water, sky, and foliage are lit by the sun, a russet globe in the right sky. A broad shimmer on the water illuminates a figure in silhouette bending down to bathe.



*Obeah in a Trance*, 1984, watercolor and gouache on paper, 29<sup>5</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 19<sup>5</sup>/<sub>16</sub> in. Estate of Romare Bearden, courtesy of the Romare Bearden Foundation, New York

Bearden made many images of the Caribbean Obeah woman, including this one. When sixteen were exhibited in New York City in 1984, the title of each was given in English, French, and Creole.

## Activity: Make a Collage

SLIDE 3, TRANSPARENCY 1, AND REPRODUCTION;  
SLIDE 10



SLIDE 3, TRANSPARENCY 1,  
AND REPRODUCTION

*Tomorrow I May Be Far Away*

“What better medium than collage to express the accumulation of memories?” an art critic wrote about one of Bearden’s collage series.

Decide on a subject for a collage project that touches on one aspect of American life during the past decade. The class can create a group or individual collages.

### Step 1- Analyze a Bearden collage.

Identify and list some of Bearden’s important symbols by looking at the reproductions of *Tomorrow I May Be Far Away* and *The Street*. In the first look for images from Bearden’s childhood—trains, wooden cabins, men and women in fields, roosters, church events, and the materials and dress of the South such as weathered wood, printed cotton fabric, head scarves, and hats. In *The Street* seek symbols of Harlem life: stoops, apartment blocks, crowded streets, buildings that block the sky.

### Step 2- Collect collage elements following Bearden’s example.

Cut from magazines, newspapers, computer printouts, cards, posters, and other reproductions. Look for colors, textures, forms, symbolic images, and visual evocations of space, mood, time, or tempo important to your theme.

**Step 3- Work on your collage with the goal of combining both the specific (you) and general (your culture).**

Give yourselves the time you need to tackle this project!

Did your collage:

- imagine
- personalize
- capture
- integrate
- transform
- release
- symbolize
- recall
- inform

It's not easy to accomplish all of the above, but that's what Bearden did, and it's why his collages combine visual, emotional, and cultural memory.

Now that you have created a collage, do you agree with the quote above?



SLIDE 10

*The Street*





# A Leader in the Arts Community

RETROSPECTIVE  
FOR  
ROMARE  
BEARDEN  
NOW

MAKE  
MOMA  
MODERN;  
MAKE THE  
SCENE NO



Poster for art classes at the Harlem Community Art Center, mid-1930s. Library of Congress

Previous page: detail of photograph on page 38



Invitation for the first Spiral exhibition. Romare Bearden Foundation, New York

Woodruff suggested Spiral as a name for the group, alluding to the Archimedean Spiral, which moves outward and constantly upward. Spiral's *First Group Showing* was subtitled *Works in Black and White*. Bearden had suggested the exhibition's black-and-white theme because it comprised both socio-political and formal concerns.

As a child, Romare Bearden had learned the value of making positive contributions and shaping the ideas and policies of a community. His mother Bessye was a community leader. In 1922 she was the first black woman elected to a local school board, serving on the New York City School Board No. 15 until 1939. From 1927 to 1928, she was the New York editor of the *Chicago Defender*, a popular African-American weekly newspaper that reported on race-related issues in the United States. As a prominent social figure in Harlem, Bessye Bearden brought the arts home, hosting regular gatherings of the black intelligentsia that included such luminaries as Langston Hughes and Duke Ellington. Bearden, too, would seek out the intellectual stimulation of fellow artists. Early in his career, he became involved in numerous arts organizations, such as the Harlem Artists' Guild and the 306 studio (a gathering place at 141st Street for artists, writers, and musicians).

In 1963 Bearden and fellow artist Hale Woodruff invited other artists, later calling themselves the Spiral group, to meet at Bearden's downtown Canal Street studio to discuss political events related to the civil rights movement and the plight of blacks in America. Initially the group was concerned with logistical issues, such as obtaining busses to travel to the March on Washington in the summer of 1963. However, their efforts turned toward aesthetic concerns, rather than political. Spiral member Norman Lewis framed the question: "Is there a Negro Image?" To which group member Felrath Hines responded, "There is no Negro Image in the twentieth century—in the 1960s. There are only prevailing ideas that influence everyone all over the world, to which the Negro has been, and is, contributing. Each person paints out of the life he lives." Spiral sought to define how it could contribute to the civil rights movement and to what author Ralph Ellison called a "new visual order."

## Working in Black and White

After formation of Spiral, Bearden concentrated on collage and, at the suggestion of a colleague, began to enlarge them photostatically. These black-and-white enlargements, later called Projections, earned him critical success. However, Bearden's exploration of photomechanical processes predates his Projections. In the 1950s he systematically copied the works of old master painters as a means of improving his own artistic skills. He took reproductions of paintings to a photography studio, had them enlarged in black and white, and substituted his own color schemes for the originals. Bearden explained: "I did that with Giotto, Duccio, Veronese, Rembrandt—right on up to Monet. I spent three years copying." Studying these black-and-white reproductions informed his understanding of composition, and he began to think about color independent of form.



*The Street*, 1964, photostat on fiberboard, Edition 1/6, 31 x 40 in. Estate of Romare Bearden, courtesy of the Romare Bearden Foundation, New York



*The Street*, 1964, collage of various papers on cardboard, 9<sup>5</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 11<sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub> in. Milwaukee Art Museum, gift of Friends of Art and the African American Art Acquisition Fund



### What is a Photostat?

*Until the 1960s, the easiest and most reliable way to get an accurate copy of an original was by using a Photostat camera. It is the size of an office copier, had to be used in a darkroom, and produced only black-and-white reproductions. The Photostat camera functions like a 35mm camera, but produces two images: one positive, one negative.*

Bearden's black-and-white photostats of old master paintings have been described as "dark-skinned art history." Although he felt that he would benefit by studying works by the great painters of Western art, he was also struck by the fact that nearly all the figures depicted were white. Bearden recognized the power of the photostatic process to change white figures into black. He used this artistic strategy of race-reversal throughout his career, fusing his African and African-American heritage with the icons and archetypes of Western cultural history. It was one of his most effective tools for creating imagery at once personal and universal.



Positive and negative photostatic reproductions

Nicolas Poussin, French, 1594–1665,  
*The Feeding of the Child Jupiter*, c. 1640  
oil on canvas. National Gallery of Art,  
Washington, Samuel H. Kress Collection

As a class, form an art club and produce a student exhibition. Here are some of the many questions to consider as you begin this process.

- Like Spiral's, will your exhibition have a common theme or idea to convey the purpose of your group (for example, to raise awareness of homelessness or endangered species)?
- Will the exhibition include all media (painting, sculpture, photography, creative writing, etc.) or just one kind of art?
- Once a theme is determined (or not), what is the division of labor?
- Who will write the labels, design the exhibition space, and display the art?
- Will everyone contribute a piece of art to the show, or will only some pieces be shown? How is this decided?
- How will you advertise your exhibition?
- Who is your audience?
- Once the exhibition is ready, will you have guides to help visitors understand and interpret the exhibition?

Good luck. Hope it's a blockbuster!

Reflecting on the process of creating a group exhibition may also help students evaluate how effectively they worked together as a team.

Discuss the following:

- Was it difficult for the group to decide on one idea?
- Did everyone have an equal say in the decisions or did one or two students become the group's leaders?
- How might you do things differently for future exhibitions?

To extend the activity, take photographs of the art, write captions for each piece, and create a scrapbook or catalogue for the students to enjoy long after the exhibition has been taken down.

Bearden was committed through writing and art to elevate the status of black artists to a position equal to that of white artists. Discuss with students issues of concern in the world today. Ask each student to choose one issue and create a collage using magazine and newspaper cuttings that will raise awareness of the problem or suggest solutions. Display student work around the classroom. Discuss with students how art can play a role in improving society's problems. Pick an issue and have them design a plan of action. Will they:

- create art
- write reviews
- donate to an institution
- volunteer?

Demonstrators at the Museum of Modern Art in the late 1960s protest lack of focus on achievements by African-American artists. Romare Bearden Foundation, New York, photo: Chester Higgins



What could Bearden learn by changing color images to black and white?

Conduct an experiment. Examine a color reproduction of a work of art. Make a list of your observations. Next, make a black-and-white photocopy of that image, or on a computer switch the color scheme to grayscale, and answer the following questions:

- Without the distraction of color, what did you notice first?
- What kinds of things do you notice now that you had not seen in the color version?
- Describe the composition. Is it easier to define now?
- Which shapes and forms appear clearer in black and white than in color?

Now make a very light copy of the image. Color it using your own palette. How does your work differ from the original? (Consider mood, emphasis, shifts in meaning.)



Music



“I paint out of the tradition  
of the blues.”

Previous page and opposite: This undated photograph was among Bearden’s papers. Estate of Romare Bearden, courtesy of the Romare Bearden Foundation, New York

#### SLIDE 11

*Of the Blues: Carolina Shout*, 1974, collage of various papers with paint and surface abrasion on fiberboard, 37½ x 51 in. Mint Museum of Art, Charlotte, North Carolina, Museum Purchase: National Endowment for the Arts Matching Fund and the Charlotte Debutante Club Fund



Watery forms at the bottom and a leafy branch at the right suggest that these men and women are gathered to celebrate and sing praise at a river baptism. Their strong silhouettes, stark against a red background, open mouths, and emphatic gestures suggest the ecstatic responses of an amen corner, its shouts and moans rising in counterpoint to the phrasing of the preacher’s words.

Listen to: James P. Johnson, “Carolina Shout” on the *Romare Bearden Revealed* CD

Since Johnson’s stride piano conjures a milieu of honky-tonks and dance halls, Bearden’s image links sacred and profane.

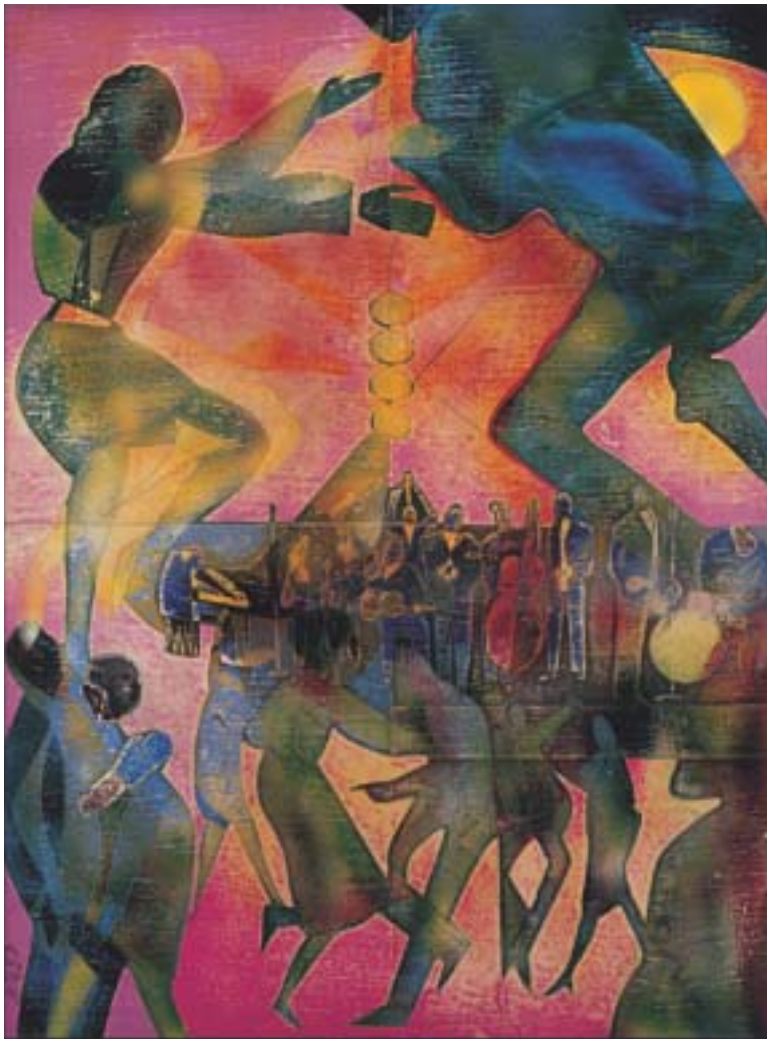
### Music as Subject

Bearden looked to music—jazz and the blues—for many of his subjects.

He painted entire series of works entitled *Of the Blues* and *Of Jazz*. They emerged from memory and experience of the South—of gospels and spirituals sung in church, of blue notes bending through warm nights. And they emerged from his life in New York—the sophistication of bands playing Harlem clubs, the excitement of crowded dance floors.

How could it be otherwise? When he was a boy, Bearden’s family apartment was just across the street from the stage door of the Lafayette. Duke Ellington, Fats Waller, Ella Fitzgerald—they were all guests in the Bearden home. He lived only blocks from the Savoy Ballroom and for sixteen years worked in a studio above the fabled Apollo Theatre. Bearden saw jazz as a metaphor for the energy of life.

Let’s look at three pairs of paintings and musical selections.



### SLIDE 12

*Of the Blues: At the Savoy*, 1974, collage of various papers with paint, ink and graphite on fiberboard, 48 x 36 in. From the Collection of Raymond J. McGuire

For nearly a quarter-century after it first opened in 1926, the Savoy Ballroom was one of the most important venues in jazz, a place where innovation happened. Drummer Chick Webb opened there with his orchestra in 1931. Performing with singer Ella Fitzgerald, Webb's band had audiences "stomping." Dancers filled the 200-foot dance floor. Two bandstands kept the music playing continuously, till the wee hours. Bearden recalled the time: "Everything you did was, you might say, geared to the groove."

Listen to: Chick Webb and his Orchestra, "Stompin' at the Savoy" and "Slappin' Seventh Avenue (with the Sole of My Shoes)" on the *Romare Bearden Revealed* CD





## SLIDE 3

*Tomorrow I May Be Far Away*, 1966/1967, collage of various papers with charcoal and graphite on canvas, 46 x 56 in. National Gallery of Art, Washington, Paul Mellon Fund



Bearden took the title for this collage from a blues song, “Good Chib Blues,” first recorded in 1929.

Aah, tomorrow I may be far away  
 Oh, tomorrow I may be far away  
 Don't try to jive me, sweet talk can't make me stay

The shingled buildings and waiting black men come from Bearden's memories of North Carolina—blues singers and bottleneck guitars, farm hands, watermelon, and the ubiquitous sound of a train in the distance, taking African Americans north.

Listen to: Edith Johnson, “Good Chib Blues” and “Autumn Lamp” on the *Romare Bearden Revealed* CD

### Music and Aesthetic Choices

Does the connection between Bearden's work and music go beyond subject?

There are parallels between the way jazz and blues musicians make their art and the way Bearden approached his (call and response, improvisation).

Do the sounds of jazz or the blues even influence the way Bearden's paintings look?

#### *Call and response*

When Bearden said he worked out of the tradition of the blues, he emphasized the role of call and recall. His reprise of often-worked themes from his memory—and the often-repeated motifs associated with them—seemed to him like the riffed repetition of a classic blues AAB pattern, in which the second line is a slight alteration of the first.

Listen to: Trixie Smith, "Freight Train Blues"

I've got the freight train blues, but I'm too darn mean to cry  
I've got the freight train blues, too darn mean to cry  
I'm gonna love that man till the day he die

There's three trains ready but none ain't goin' my way  
I said there's three trains ready but none ain't goin' my way  
But the sun's gonna shine in my backdoor some day

For performers singing without music, repetition gave time to devise the next line. As in Bearden's work it is both evocation of the familiar and a jumping off place for composition.



*Train Whistle Blues: I*, 1964, collage of various papers on cardboard, 14 x 10<sup>5</sup>/<sub>8</sub> in. Laura Grosch and Herb Jackson

#### SLIDE 13

*Train Whistle Blues: II*, 1964, collage of various papers with paint and graphite on cardboard, 11 x 14<sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub> in. Robert and Faye Davidson, Los Angeles, California





Above: *Thank you...For F.U.M.L. (Funking Up My Life)*, 1978, collage of various papers with ink and graphite on fiberboard, 15 x 18 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub> in. Donald Byrd. Below: detail



### **Improvisation**

The word jazz applies to many different kinds of sounds: stride, swing, bebop, cool, hot, free, fusion... Jazz defies definition. It is not a single—or even several—musical styles. More, it is a style of making music—an approach by the players to the process of creating. Many, although not all, consider improvisation its most distinguishing feature.

Bearden himself often used musical analogies to describe his work and pointed to the improvisation that is inherent in collage:

*“The more I played around with visual notions as if I were improvising like a jazz musician, the more I realized what I wanted to do as a painter, and how I wanted to do it.”*

*“Once you get going, all sorts of things open up. Sometimes something just seems to fall into place, like piano keys that every now and again just seem to be right where your fingers come down.”*

Bearden advised a younger artist to *“become a blues singer—only you sing on the canvas. You improvise—you find the rhythm and catch it good, and structure as you go along—then the song is you.”*

Improvisation offers artists great scope for self-expression, but it is not totally free—not chance, not chaos. Improvisation succeeds only because it operates within a structure. This is true for jazz solos and Bearden’s compositions. The structure of his paintings and collages was of utmost concern:

*“I am nonetheless thinking about how things are going together and have a feeling about how the work is going to go.”*

*“What I am trying to do is establish a vertical and a horizontal control of the canvas...I’d like the language to be as classical as possible.”*



## SLIDE 14

*Prevalence of Ritual: Baptism (detail)*, 1964, collage of various papers with paint, ink, and graphite on cardboard, 9 1/8 x 12 in. Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, gift of Joseph H. Hirshhorn, 1966. Below: details

**Visual equivalences?**

English critic and essayist Walter Pater once wrote that “all art constantly aspires to the condition of music.” Not all would agree, and some would reject the idea of any correspondence at all. Bearden did not paint with sound, of course, but he, more than most artists, seems to have sensed a real connection between music and the formal properties of his art.

The slipped (often flatted) notes of blues and jazz, the blue notes, produce an effect like the offset planes of Bearden’s collaged faces. They are naturalistic in their parts, photographically so even, but abstract in the whole. Stepped, constructed, faceted, with features tumbling like rapid notes. Like music itself, Bearden’s faces are part expectation and part surprise.

Working in a print workshop in 1985, Bearden listened as a recording by drummer Max Roach and trumpeter Clifford Brown came over the radio. “And I just took a brush and painted the sounds, the color rhythms, and the silences...” He gave the print that resulted to Roach.

In 1986 Bearden joined musician Jackie McLean on stage in Hartford, Connecticut, to perform “Sound Collages and Visual Improvisation.” While McLean played African drums, piano, and alto sax (his main instrument), Bearden drew with markers.

*“One of the things I did was listen to a lot of music. I’d take a sheet of paper and just make lines while I listened to records—a kind of shorthand to pick up the rhythm and the intervals.”*







Stuart Davis, *Swing Landscape*, 1938, oil on canvas, Bloomington, Indiana University of Art



*A Walk in Paradise Gardens*, 1955, oil on fiberboard, 24 x 20 in. Robert L. Johnson from The Barnett-Aden Collection, Washington, D.C.

Before devoting himself fully to painting in 1955, Bearden received encouragement and advice from post-cubist artist Stuart Davis. Davis, who formed his own jazz ensemble, urged Bearden to study jazz for visual analogies.

Particularly, he suggested Bearden listen to Earl Hines on the piano. Davis likened his own color intervals to the way Hines used space. "Listen," Davis told Bearden, "to what he isn't playing. What you don't need is just as important as what you do need."

Bearden complied: "I listened for hours to recordings of Earl Hines at the piano. Finally, I was able to concentrate on the silences between the notes. I found that this was very helpful to me in the transmutation of sound into colors and in the placement of objects in my paintings and collages. I could have studied this integration and spacing in Greek vase painting...but with Earl Hines I ingested it within my own background. Jazz has shown me the ways of achieving artistic structures that are personal to me, but it also provides me continuing finger-snapping, head-shaking enjoyment...."

The voids and spacing of shapes changed in Bearden's works—for good—after 1955. Compare the round undulating forms of *Now the Dove* (1946), which was inspired by Lorca's poem "Lament for a Bullfighter," to the more upright and energetic rhythms of *City Lights* (1970).

Listen to: Earl Hines with Louis Armstrong, "A Weather Bird"

Hines' piano style broke away from the stride progression of early jazz with strong octaves (or tenths) that emphasized the pulse. Pauses between notes are as expressive as the notes themselves. Hines played with trumpet-great Louis Armstrong, and his piano is sometimes called 'trumpet style.' Compare this recording by Hines and Armstrong with James P. Johnson's "Carolina Shout."

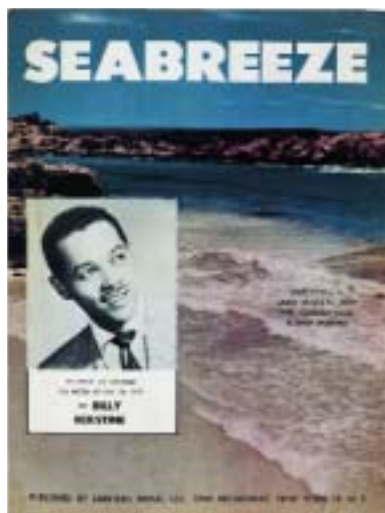


#### SLIDE 15

*City Lights*, c. 1970, collage of various papers with ink, graphite, and surface abrasion on fiberboard, 13 1/2 x 10 1/2 in. Beverly Zimmerman Private Collection in memory of Phil Weinberg

#### SLIDE 2

*Now the Dove and the Leopard Wrestle*, 1946, oil on canvas, 23 1/2 x 29 1/4 in. Clements Library, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor



“Seabreeze” sheet music cover with Bearden’s name among writer credits. Estate of Romare Bearden, courtesy of the Romare Bearden Foundation, New York

### Music and Life

Music played a direct part of Bearden’s life. He was not only a listener, a fan, and an artist who explored musical themes—he was, for a while, a songwriter. Hoping to make more money writing music than painting, he penned a few hits, including “Seabreeze,” which was recorded by Billy Eckstine and Dizzy Gillespie.

Listen to: “Seabreeze” on the *Romare Bearden Revealed* CD

A trip through the jazz bins in a record store will reveal yet another connection between Bearden and the music of jazz—he designed a number of covers for albums and CDs, including one for Wynton Marsalis.

Listen to: “J Mood” on the *Romare Bearden Revealed* CD and to the Wynton Marsalis CD, *J Mood*

Finally, and perhaps most fundamentally, Bearden was connected to music through his outlook on life. The blues lets you feel good by feeling bad. As Bearden said, “Even though you go through these terrible experiences, you come out feeling good. That’s what the blues say and that’s what I believe—life will prevail.”

Listen to: Albert King, “That’s What the Blues Is All About”

*J Mood*, c. 1985, collage of various papers with ink on fiberboard, 25¼ x 21 in. Courtesy of Wynton Marsalis





### Draw to Music

Have students draw freehand while listening to different jazz recordings, as Bearden did. Compare students' work, looking for similarities in rhythm, etc., that might reflect the influence of the music.

### Compare Poetry and Music

The poet Langston Hughes, who was a visitor to the Bearden home, also did "blues" and "jazz" series. Play a blues and a jazz selection. Then read one jazz and one blues poem aloud to the class and ask students to guess which is which. Discuss how the poems differ in terms of structure (diagram the rhyme), rhythm (scan the meter), and language tone. Then look at Bearden's jazz and blues collages. Can similar sets of differences be identified? Venn diagrams can be used for the comparisons.

Suggested Hughes poems:

"The Weary Blues"

"Homesick Blues"

"Lenox Avenue, Midnight"

"Dream Boogie"

Suggested Listening:

"J Mood" or "Laughin' and Talkin' (with Higg)" on the *Romare Bearden Revealed* CD (jazz)

"Autumn Lamp" on the *Romare Bearden Revealed* CD (blues)

Suggested Bearden collages:

*City Lights*

*Tomorrow I May Be Far Away*



SLIDE 15

*City Lights*



SLIDE 3, TRANSPARENCY 1,  
AND REPRODUCTION

*Tomorrow I May Be Far Away*



**Homesick Blues**

De railroad bridge's  
 A sad song in the air.  
 De railroad bridge's  
 A sad song in the air.  
 Ever time de trains pass  
 I wants to go somewhere.

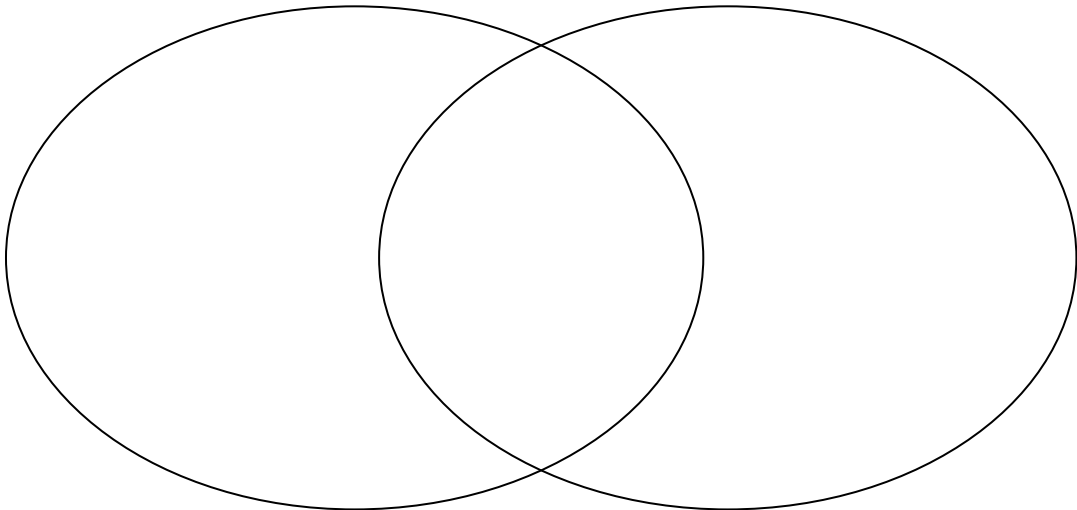
I went down to de station  
 Ma heart was in ma mouth.  
 Went down to the station,  
 Heart was in ma mouth.  
 Lookin' for a box car  
 To roll me to de South.

Homesick blues, Lawd,  
 'S a terrible thing to have.  
 Homesick blues is  
 A terrible thing to have.  
 To keep from cryin'  
 I opens my mouth an' laughs.

**The Weary Blues (excerpt)**

Droning a drowsy, syncopated tune,  
 Rocking back and forth to a mellow croon,  
 I heard a Negro play.  
 Down on Lenox Avenue the other night  
 By the pale dull pallor of an old gas light  
 He did a lazy sway....  
 He did a lazy sway....  
 To the tune o' those Weary Blues.  
 With his ebony hands on each ivory key  
 He made that poor piano moan with melody.  
 O Blues!  
 Swaying to and fro on his rickety stool  
 He played that sad raggy tune like a musical fool.  
 Sweet Blues!  
 Coming from a black man's soul.  
 O Blues!  
 In a deep song voice with a melancholy tone  
 I heard that Negro sing, that old piano moan—  
 "Ain't got nobody in all this world,  
 Ain't got nobody but ma self.  
 I's gwine to quit ma frownin'  
 And put ma troubles on the shelf."

Venn diagram



**Dream Boogie**

Good morning, daddy!  
Ain't you heard  
The boogie-woogie rumble  
Of a dream deferred?

Listen closely:  
You'll hear their feet  
Beating out and beating out a—

*You think  
It's a happy beat?*

Listen to it closely:  
Ain't you heard  
Something underneath  
like a—

*What did I say?*

Sure,  
I'm happy!  
Take it away!

*Hey, pop!  
Re-bob!  
Mop!*

*Y-e-a-h!*

**Lenox Avenue: Midnight**

The rhythm of life  
Is a Jazz rhythm,  
Honey.  
The gods are laughing at us.

The broken heart of love,  
The weary, weary heart of pain,—  
Overtones,  
Undertones,  
To the rumble of street cars,  
To the swish of rain.

Lenox Avenue,  
Honey.  
Midnight,  
And the gods are laughing at us.

—all poems Langston Hughes  
© Estate of Langston Hughes

**Notes on recordings**

(Many of these selections can be heard online through various websites. See the Resource Finder at the end of this packet.)

Branford Marsalis Quartet  
*Romare Bearden Revealed*  
©2003 Marsalis Music/Rounder Records  
11661-3306-2  
Included in this packet

James P. Johnson  
Available on several Smithsonian Folkways recordings.

Chick Webb  
The original recording of "Stompin' at the Savoy" (1921) was on Vocalion Records. It is available on various compilations, including Biograph BCD 105.

Edith Johnson  
On Rosetta LP 1308. Available on CD: Agram Blues AB 2016. Recorded in 1929 with Roosevelt Sykes on piano. The lyrics contain veiled sexual references. The 'chib' of the title is a weapon, similar to a shiv.

Trixie Smith  
On the LP *Out Came the Blues* (Coral CP 58) 1970. Originally recorded in 1938 with Sidney Bechet on clarinet.

Earl Hines with Louis Armstrong  
Okeh 4145H  
Available on various compilations including Smithsonian Folkways recordings.

Wynton Marsalis  
*J Mood*  
Sony/Columbia 1988

Albert King  
Recorded originally with Little Milton (Stax SCD-41232-2); also available on later recordings and compilations.

# Artistic and Literary Sources





### Borrowing and Mixing

In 1977 Bearden made a series of watercolors illustrating *The Odyssey*, Homer's ancient Greek epic from about 750–700 B.C. For this scene, he used a painting by the Italian Renaissance artist Pintoricchio as a model.

*“Everything that I have done since then [several years after leaving the Art Students League] has been...an extension of my experiments with flat painting, shallow space, Byzantine stylization and African design.”*



### SLIDE 16 AND TRANSPARENCY 3

*Odysseus: Odysseus Enters at the Door Disguised as an Old Man*, c. 1977, watercolor, gouache, and ink over carbon-paper line on paper, 12<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 15<sup>5</sup>/<sub>8</sub> in. Evelyn N. Boulware

Pintoricchio, *Penelope with the Suitors*, 1509, fresco on canvas. National Gallery, London

Previous page: detail of photograph on page 58



After a ten-year quest to return home following the Trojan War, Odysseus arrives in Ithaka to find his wife Penelope under siege by suitors. She had promised to marry one of them upon completion of her weaving, but—convinced her husband will return someday—she wove her cloth by day and unwove it each night so that she would never be finished. Arriving to see Penelope’s faithfulness, Odysseus fights off the suitors and reclaims his place as king.

You can see the almost one-to-one correspondence between these images. Observe the details Bearden borrows from Pintoricchio’s painting:

- An interior with a square-tiled floor
- The cat playing with a ball of yarn in the foreground (Did Bearden substitute his own cat?)
- The window, with Odysseus’s boat floating on the Ionian Sea beyond
- A rush of suitors on the right with Odysseus, at the door, behind them
- Penelope at left, with her hands on her loom, its upright frame and pulleys silhouetted against the window
- A female servant at her feet
- A male figure advancing toward Penelope, his pose and gesture the same in each work

Now, look closer. Notice the ways Bearden makes these elements from Pintoricchio’s work suit his own ideas about space, color, and composition.

### **Analyze Space.**

Pintoricchio’s interior space seems to have depth, as if you could step in. Bearden’s space is tilted up and flattened by the repeated, high-keyed color pattern of his floor tiles. We are stopped at the picture plane. Compare the suitors and the figures of Penelope and her servant. Pintoricchio’s figures occupy space; they are modeled and three-dimensional.

Bearden’s friezelike figures have profile faces, frontal eyes, and emphatic hand gestures resembling figures in ancient Egyptian art.

Do you see a connection between Bearden’s simplified color shapes and the work here by the twentieth-century French master Henri Matisse?

### **Consider Bearden’s strategy of race-reversal.**

Pintoricchio’s figures are white, dressed in typical Renaissance clothing. Bearden’s figures are black. While elements of their dress, such as the suitors’ leggings and boots, are Renaissance, also present are African and black American dress and adornment—Penelope’s flat-collared dress, the headscarves she and her servant wear, and the suitors’ Benin-style African headgear.



Foreigners, possibly Nubians, bearing tribute. Wallpainting from the tomb of Amenhotep Huyi, 18th dynasty, photo: E. Strouhal. Werner Forman Archive/Art Resource, NY



Henri Matisse, *Woman Seated in an Armchair*, 1940, oil on canvas. National Gallery of Art, Washington, Given in loving memory of her husband, Taft Schreiber, by Rita Schreiber



*Backyard* (detail), 1967, collage of various papers with graphite on fiberboard, 40 x 30 in. Marian B. Javits

**Now compare Bearden's collage *The Prevalence of Ritual: Baptism* to the visual sources reproduced here.**

*"In my work...I seek connections....*

*People in a baptism in a Virginia*

*stream are linked to John the*

*Baptist, to ancient purification*

*rites, and to their African heritage."*



#### SLIDE 14 AND TRANSPARENCY 4

*Prevalence of Ritual: Baptism*, 1964, collage of various papers with paint, ink, and graphite on cardboard, 9 7/8 x 12 in. Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, gift of Joseph H. Hirshhorn, 1966



Bearden's photostat of African masks.  
Romare Bearden Foundation, New York

Here, a baptism, the Christian rite of purification and initiation, is being performed. It is a river baptism such as Bearden witnessed in the South. At center—his body constructed of brown-toned paper, his face partially covered by an African mask—is the one being baptized. On his left stands the preacher, one arm raised to anoint him. His rectangular profile is pasted over another face, and his dress combines fragments of a preacher's white collar and cuffs and a businessman's pinstriped suit. Helping support the initiate on the other side is a profile figure with exaggerated, carved features—especially his nose and mouth.

Below, immersed to the chest in water, are two figures whose faces have the incised or slit eyes reminiscent of some African sculpture. Parts of these faces are actually formed by picture fragments of masks. Their hands are enlarged and expressive. A female figure, right, wears a white headscarf. Figures, left, wear draped robes. At bottom are collaged rectangles that suggest the river, and behind, at left, are classic details of the rural South Bearden knew—cotton field, train on the move, and country church.



Bearden admired the formal beauty and stylized forms of African masks and statuary. His felt strongly connected to African art, especially during the 1960s when the civil rights and black pride movements engaged American society. In addition to studying African art in books and journals, he could see it in local collections and museum exhibitions. The black-and-white photostatic image opposite, a group of African masks, was in Bearden's studio—he may have cut reproductions out of books or magazines and laid them out for this composite photograph.

Though not necessarily the precise works Bearden saw, these comparative illustrations typify the African art to which Bearden had access. You can easily identify these African sculptural elements in Bearden's collage.

- 1- The central figure wears a Kwele mask from Gabon or Congo.
- 2- Linear markings on the raised hand of the right figure in the stream and on the heads of the two figures at left recall ritual scarification, seen in the sculpture of an Ife king figure reproduced here.
- 3- The eyes and nose of the left foreground figure are from an African mask of a water spirit—a perfect reference to baptism's use of water for purification.
- 4- Who could miss the exaggerated features of the center-right figure? It might be part of a Nimba mask from Guinea, which exported many similar examples.

Now compare *Baptism's* central figure with the cubist painting by Pablo Picasso, *Les Femmes d'Alger*. Picasso's work was a shocking break from the European art world's norm for representing the human figure. The African art Picasso saw in Paris was decisive in the contrived, planar bodies, and masklike faces he gave his *demoiselles*. Bearden knew Picasso's work, which filtered African art through a Western sensibility.

Bearden's *Baptism* collage also reflects the profound influence he found in religious paintings by fourteenth-century Italian masters such as Duccio and Giotto. Look at Giotto's fresco from the Florentine church of Santa Croce. Bearden incorporated a shoulder and drapery from this or a similar work. He may also have used the similar outstretched hands for both compositional and spiritual purposes.



From upper left: 1. Kwele face mask, wood, Gabon or Congo, 19th–20th century, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, bequest of Nelson A. Rockefeller, 1979, photo ©1993 Metropolitan Museum of Art. 2. Portrait of an Oni (King) (detail), bronze, Ife culture, Nigeria, late 15th/early 17th century, Museum of Ife Antiquities, Nigeria, photo: Werner Forman Archive/Art Resource, NY. 3. Otobo mask of a water spirit, wood, Kalabari Ijo, Nigeria, Collection Raymond Wielgus. 4. Nimba shoulder mask (detail), wood, Baga tribe, Guinea, Rietberg Museum, Zurich, photo: Wettstein & Kauf



Pablo Picasso, *Les Femmes d'Alger*, 1907, oil on canvas, Museum of Modern Art, New York, Lillie P. Bliss Bequest

Giotto, *The Raising of Drusiana*, detail from a fresco illustrating the lives of St. John the Baptist and St. John the Evangelist, mid-1320s Peruzzi Chapel, Church of Santa Croce, Florence, Italy. Photo: © Scala/Art Resource, NY



“What I’ve attempted to do is  
 establish a world through art in  
 which the validity of my Negro  
 experience could live and make its  
 own logic.”



*Odysseus: Odysseus Enters at the Door  
 Disguised as an Old Man*



*Prevalence of Ritual: Baptism*

## Changing

Like many of his contemporaries, Bearden was profoundly aware of the invisibility of blacks in mainstream American society and culture. Ralph Ellison’s novel *Invisible Man* (1947) expresses this frustrating dilemma in its opening line: “I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me....”

Bearden’s work transforms the world of art and its archetypes into a culture that embraces black folk, black life, black culture, and black ritual. In doing so, it mediates the gulf between ancient and modern, white and blackness, Africa and the African diaspora.

Let’s see exactly how this happens in our two works...

### **First, Bearden’s *Odysseus watercolor.***

By integrating a different pictorial structure—flattened, patterned, and high-colored—into the format of Pintoricchio’s composition, Bearden sped time forward. Homer’s ancient story becomes a contemporary tale.

Making visual references to Egyptian and black southern culture, he also transformed the story’s meaning. Odysseus, Penelope—in fact all of the figures—are black. By this singular transposition, Bearden creates not just a black version of *The Odyssey*—part of the white, Western canon—but comments on its historical pervasiveness and its racial exclusivity.

The suitors’ African-inspired headgear, and the southern dresses and headscarves of Penelope and her servant contribute a final cross-over. Stand-ins for the artist’s memory of rural North Carolina, they imprint American blackness upon both Homer’s ancient tale of a man’s journey home and its successive white-based depictions.

### **And now let’s consider Bearden’s *Baptism.***

Your goal: understanding the many levels on which Bearden adapted elements and strategies from diverse art forms so that this image, rooted in autobiography, bears the shared imprint of universal experience across centuries and continents—an experience that



Southern river baptism, c. 1905.  
Library of Congress

also expands our understanding of Bearden's sources themselves. His collage echoes the many depictions of St. John baptizing Jesus in the River Jordan—just as the ritual itself echoes that original rite.

### ***Wade in the water...***

As Bearden was growing up, river baptism was common in southern Protestant churches, particularly among rural black congregations. It continues to be practiced today. A number of traditional African religions also use immersion to cleanse both body and soul. These rituals embody desires for renewal and freedom that resonate deeply in the African-American experience. The connectedness to African traditions was felt by the faithful who “gathered at the river.”

As we discovered, the faces of many of Bearden's faithful—deacons, initiates, church members on the shore—are composed from fragments of African masks. We saw faces and hands that brought to mind the scarification rituals of several African cultures. Bearden admired the formal beauty and stylized form of these African elements. He also understood their role in African rituals and rites of passage. It is surely no accident that Bearden selected a water spirit mask for this baptism scene.

Another tradition informing this work is the religious painting of the West—not a single work, but an entire corpus of paintings depicting the Baptism of Christ. Bearden's work invokes these paintings of Jesus and St. John in the River Jordan, just as the river baptism itself echoes that original act of anointing.

Bearden's transformation goes beyond a one-way recasting of Western forms in black American guise. He also transforms our visual expectations of archetypes. His *Visitation* and iconic images of *Mother* (read: Madonna) and *Child* (page 27) establish a multicultural standard for the depiction of such figures as the archangel Gabriel, the Virgin Mary, Jesus, and the saints. Bearden thus made them still more powerful in their ability to touch the human spirit.



Master of the Life of Saint John the Baptist,  
*The Baptism of Christ*, probably 1330/1340,  
tempera on panel, National Gallery of Art,  
Washington, Samuel H. Kress Collection



*The Visitation*, 1941, gouache with ink and  
graphite on brown paper, 30<sup>5</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 46<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> in.  
Estate of Romare Bearden, courtesy of the  
Romare Bearden Foundation New York

## Activity: Match Bearden's Work with Artistic Models

### TRANSPARENCY 5

Your turn! Try matching works by Bearden to art that inspired him. Photocopy and distribute to students the **Handout of Comments**. Then project **Transparency 5** and have students work together to match Bearden's works on the left with their sources on the right.



### Matches:

1.
  - Romare Bearden, *Backyard*, 1967, collage of various papers with graphite on fiberboard. Marian B. Javits
  - Pieter de Hooch, *A Dutch Courtyard*, 1658/1660, oil on canvas. National Gallery of Art, Washington, Andrew W. Mellon Collection
2.
  - Romare Bearden, *Spring Way*, 1964, collage of various papers on cardboard. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Bequest of Henry Ward Ranger through the National Academy of Design
  - Kurt Schwitters, *Cherry Picture*, 1921, pasted papers. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Mr. and Mrs. A. Atwater Kent, Jr., Fund
3.
  - Romare Bearden, *Winter (Time of the Hawk)*, 1985, collage of various papers with paint, ink, and graphite on fiberboard. Private Collection, Charlotte, North Carolina
  - Possibly Fan Qi, *Lakeshore Estate in Winter*, 17th century, handscroll, ink and color on silk. Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution
4.
  - Romare Bearden, *Harlequin*, 1956, collage of various papers with paint, ink, and graphite on paper. Collection of Frank Stewart
  - Pablo Picasso, *Harlequin*, 1915, oil on canvas, Museum of Modern Art, Lillie P. Bliss Bequest (Scala/Art Resource, NY)
5.
  - Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *Children's Games (detail)*, 1560, oil on oakwood, Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum. Photo: Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY
  - Romare Bearden, *Profile/Part I, The Twenties: Mecklenburg County, Holiness Church Revival*, 1978, collage of various papers with paint, ink, graphite, and bleached areas on fiberboard. Dr. David H. Moore

## Handout of Comments by and about Romare Bearden

*"I am a man...who shares a dual culture...unwilling to deny the Harlem where I grew up or the Haarlem of the Dutch Masters that contributed its element to my understanding of art."*

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The art of collage—particularly its cutting (fragmenting) and regrouping of forms—was perfect for Bearden. Among the influences on his mastery of collage was an exhibition, *The Art of Assemblage*, at the Museum of Modern Art, which included thirty-five works by Kurt Schwitters.

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In the late 1950s Bearden studied Chinese art with a scholar. Elements of Chinese landscape—an open, “entry” space for the eye, geographic features equally sized, whether near or far, and contrasting shapes and voids—became fundamental to Bearden’s concepts about composition.

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Harlequins, or circus clowns, were an important theme in Picasso’s early work. Bearden’s harlequin—a saluting figure broken up and reconfigured—recalls Picasso’s cubist style, but its pulses and reliefs of color and its poise of space and form reflect Bearden’s independent direction.

Bearden said, *"What I like about...Cubism...is its primary emphasis on the essentials of structure....I also find that for me...[it] leads to an overcrowding of the pictorial space."*

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Bearden strove *"to paint the life of my people as I know it...as Bruegel painted the life of the Flemish people of his day."*

At the Art Students League Bearden studied the compositions of the Flemish artist Pieter Bruegel, whose peasants—stumbling, celebrating, trembling in life—were symbolic of human plight. Bearden was so entranced by Bruegel that his fellow students nicknamed him “Petey” after the Flemish master.



# Method





Preceding page and above: Materials from Bearden's studio



Kurt Schwitters, *Cherry Picture*, 1921, pasted papers. Museum of Modern Art, New York. Mr. and Mrs. A. Atwater Kent, Jr., Fund

### Collage: Bearden's Signature Style

Like the content of Bearden's art, his methods and materials are complex and layered. Each object merits long periods of observation to discover its many facets. Throughout his more than forty-year career, Bearden successfully worked in a wide range of media, including oil and watercolor painting, edition prints, monotypes, and even one-known assemblage sculpture. However, the technique that made him famous was collage. From the start, Bearden employed collage in unique and innovative ways, and his techniques evolved over time. This section is a summary of Bearden's collage practice, his methods and materials.

Although Bearden may have made collages as early as 1956, it was in the 1960s that his art underwent a transformation. From 1963 to 1964 two major shifts occurred in Bearden's art. First, he moved from abstraction back to figuration, and second, he changed his technique from primarily painting to primarily collage. His renewed interest in figuration may have resulted from a recent trip to France, where Bearden was inspired by European old masters. However, many factors contributed to his shift to collage.

Prominent New York artists, such as Robert Motherwell and Willem de Kooning, were using collage in the 1940s. Bearden would have known of the 1951 publication edited by Motherwell, *The Dada Painters and Poets: An Anthology*, which featured collage. In 1961 the Museum of Modern Art mounted the *Art of Assemblage*, which included collages by artists whom Bearden admired such as Jean Dubuffet and George Grosz. The 252-work exhibition also included works by dada artists Hannah Höch and Kurt Schwitters. Bearden would have been aware of this exhibition. In 1963 to 1964, he began working in collage as his primary medium.



Bearden was always concerned with the underlying geometry of his compositions. In 1968 he described his collage practice: “I first put down several rectangles of color some of which...are in the same ratio as...the rectangle that I’m working on. [Then] I paste a photograph, say, anything just to get me started, maybe a head, at certain—a few—places in the canvas...I try to move up and across the canvas, always moving up and across. If I tear anything, I tear it up and across. What I am trying to do then is establish a vertical and horizontal control of the canvas. I don’t like to get into too many slanting movements....”

#### SLIDE 17

*Spring Way*, 1964, collage of various papers on cardboard, 6<sup>5</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 9<sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub> in. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Bequest of Henry Ward Ranger through the National Academy of Design





Pieter de Hooch, Dutch, 1629–1684,  
*The Bedroom*, 1658/1660, oil on canvas.  
National Gallery of Art, Washington,  
Widener Collection

For compositional inspiration, Bearden looked to the “carefully planned structures” of the Dutch masters. He explained: “Because many of the paintings I was doing were of interiors...I began to look again at Vermeer and Pieter de Hooch and Jan Steen. I found that, especially with Vermeer and Steen, a lot of the work was controlled, like Mondrian’s, by the use of rectangles over rectangles. I really think the art of painting is the art of putting something over something else.”

Over time Bearden’s repertoire of collage materials expanded to include strips of wallpaper, posters, fabrics, foils, and paper he printed and painted himself. To some areas he added spray paint; he masked others to create crisp edges. In the 1970s Bearden began to enhance the surface texture and color by using abrasion, bleaching, and puddling techniques. Circular markings on works of the 1970s were possibly made with an electric eraser.



### SLIDE 18

*The Blues*, 1975, collage of various papers with paint, ink, and graphite on fiberboard, 24 x 18 in. Honolulu Academy of Arts/gift of Geraldine P. Clark, 1977 (4451.1). Above: detail of singer’s hand



During the late 1970s and early 1980s, some of Bearden's collages became more painterly. The ratio of painted surface is equal to or greater than the collaged areas. An example of this late painterly style is *Profile/Part II, The Thirties: Midtown Sunset*. Here the two techniques—collage and painting—seem perfectly balanced. It is difficult to distinguish the collaged areas from the painted ones. Overall there is fluidity and luminosity that produce a glow from within. Bearden described the scene as “my last view of daylight as I entered the subway on my way home from N.Y.U.”



*Midtown Sunset* is one of nineteen collages from the *Profile/Part II: The Thirties* series, which focuses primarily on Bearden's life in Harlem. In this view of New York City, Bearden's underlying geometry is apparent. The picture plane is divided into two rectangles: on the left the sun is just beginning to set, and on the right the moon has risen. Bearden's recurring sun/moon motif gives us a sense of time elapsing (and collapsing). The space is shallow, with building stacked upon building. The arcs and spire of the Chrysler Building are seen in the upper left corner. Patterns of short brushstrokes and bleached areas suggest the window-filled walls of skyscrapers. The bleached areas lend a luminous effect. Amidst the painted buildings, Bearden has used cut-paper ones to fill in this cityscape.

On the right side, patterns of horizontal and vertical lines extend the cut-paper cityscape to the top edge of the work. The ubiquitous symbol of a train creates a strong horizontal. In the bottom right corner a rectangle of blurred black, blue, green, and yellow perhaps suggests the passing of the subway, the rush of the crowd, the city's eternal movement.

#### SLIDE 19

*Profile/Part II, The Thirties: Midtown Sunset*, 1981, collage of various papers with paint and bleached areas on fiberboard, 14 x 22 in. Private collection

**Bearden at Work*****Collage materials***

Newspapers  
 Magazines, including:  
*Ebony*  
*Harper's Bazaar*  
*Life*  
*McCall's*  
*Vogue*  
 Sample catalogues  
 Photostats  
 Art reproductions  
 Foil  
 Fabric  
 Tape  
 Wallpaper  
 Various art and decorative papers, including:  
 color-aid  
 hand-painted  
 gift wrap  
 rice paper

***Other media***

Acrylic  
 Charcoal  
 Colored pencil  
 Gouache  
 Graphite  
 Ink  
 Lacquer  
 Oil  
 Pins  
 Spray paint  
 String  
 Watercolor

***Bases***

Fiberboard  
 Cardboard  
 Masonite  
 Paper  
 Canvas

***Techniques***

Bleaching  
 Cut and paste  
 Erasing (electric eraser?)  
 Sanding  
 Rubbing  
 Puddling

***Tools***

Brayer/roller  
 Scissors



## Monotypes

From 1973 to 1984 Bearden worked in the print medium of monotype. In this technique, an image is painted or drawn on metal or plastic. (Bearden used a plastic sheet.) The image is transferred to paper (“printed”), either with a printing press or hand-pressure. The resulting print is unique, although subsequent “ghost prints,” with less intense results, can be pulled from the original plate. As he did in his collages, Bearden often enhanced the print surface with graphite, watercolor, gouache, or acrylic paint.

Bearden’s monotypes demonstrate a loose, painterly style. For example, *Rain Forest—Pool*, an oil monotype with paint, suggests the lush green hills, waterfall, and gentle pools of the Caribbean island of St. Martin where Bearden and his wife lived and worked part time from 1973 to 1987. Nearly monochromatic, the cool green tones and loose brushy forms subtly convey the landscape of this island retreat.

This renewed interest in working with paint and more spontaneous brushwork of his monotypes informed the artist’s collages, some of which became more painted and painterly over time.



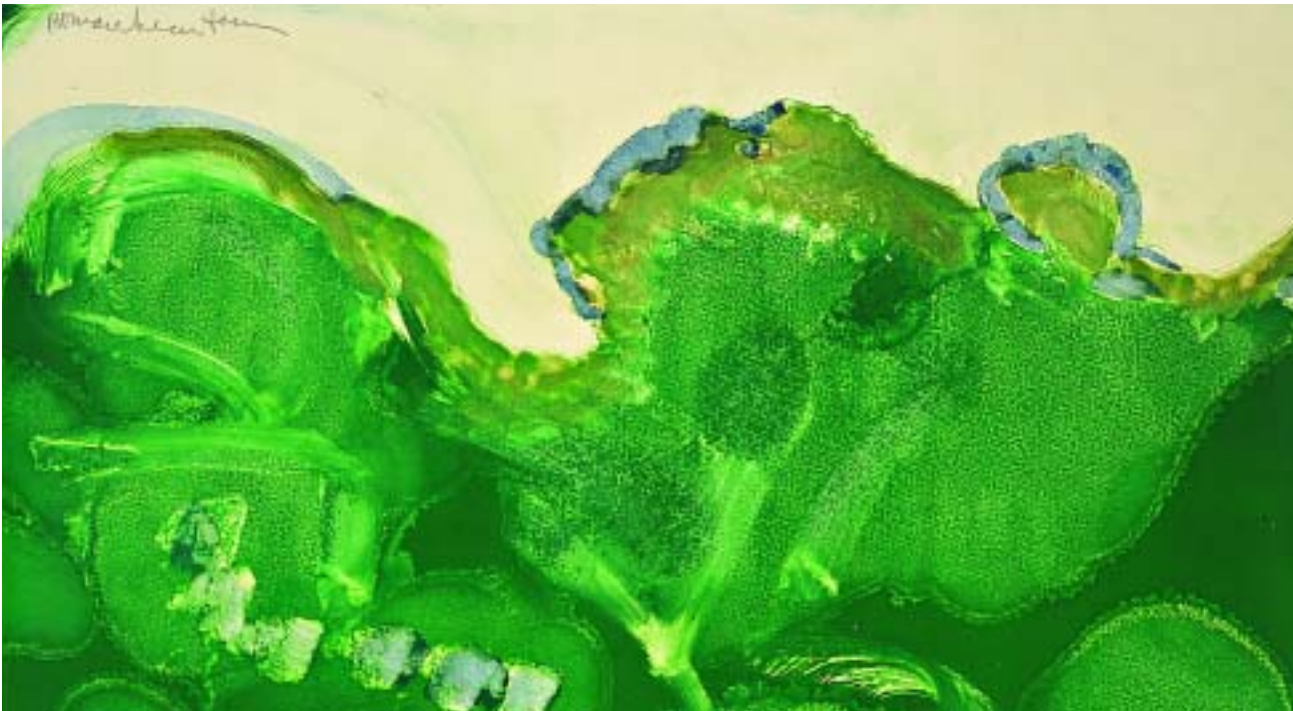
### SLIDE 20

*Rain Forest—Pool*, c. 1978, oil monotype with paint on paper, 23<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 17<sup>5</sup>/<sub>8</sub> in. Private collection, Cambridge, Massachusetts



Ask students to create a monotype using landscape as their subject. Materials for the project can be complex or simple. The medium can be ink, oil paint, or finger paint. The transfer surface can be a copper plate, an acrylic sheet, or an upside-down Styrofoam meat tray. Pressure to transfer the image can be conveyed by a professional or tabletop press, a brayer/roller, or by hand. Whichever materials you choose, the resulting image will be a unique work of art.

For more information on the monotype process, visit the website of the Smithsonian American Art Museum at <http://americanart.si.edu/collections/exhibits/monotypes/index.html>



*Rain Forest—Pool (detail)*

*“What I saw was black life presented on its own terms, on a grand and epic scale, with all its richness and fullness, in a language that was vibrant and which, made attendant to everyday life, ennobled it, affirmed its value, and exalted its presence.”*

— Playwright August Wilson about Bearden

Romare Bearden inspired other artists, but especially playwright August Wilson. Bearden’s collages of African-American life and culture influenced Wilson’s approach to drama. Like Bearden, Wilson explored themes and ideas evocative of the African-American experience during the twentieth century, and in particular, the period of the Great Migration. Wilson’s writing, like Bearden’s art, sought to place African-American subjects within universal paradigms.

With two plays, Wilson makes specific connections to Bearden’s collages. *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone* (1988) was inspired by Bearden’s *Profile/Part I, The Twenties: Millhand’s Lunch Bucket* (1978), and *The Piano Lesson* (1990) was inspired by a collage of the same name from 1983.

In the latter play, which won a Pulitzer prize, the piano, a uniquely carved, hard-won family heirloom becomes the central plot element. The characters’ past, present, and future are in some way related to this much-discussed, but rarely used instrument. Berneice Charles, the sister, wants to keep the piano, a powerful reminder of their family history. Boy Willie Charles, the brother, wants to sell it and “get me some land so I can make a life for myself to live in my own way.” Should they keep the piano as a legacy of their past, or use it to progress economically? The Charles family struggles with its past, rife with racism and poverty, as well as an uncertain future, in which a black man or woman has few opportunities to realize success.

Please note:

Wilson’s play contains some adult language and subject matter.



#### REPRODUCTION

*Piano Lesson*, 1983, collage of various papers with paint, ink, and graphite on fiberboard, 29 x 22 in. The Walter O. Evans Foundation for Art and Literature

Bearden’s collage is at once reflective of his African-American heritage and a universally understood experience—a piano lesson. In the collage, describe the interaction between the figures. What is the role of the piano? Why might Bearden choose to depict a piano lesson? Does this scene remind you of any lessons that you may have had? How so?

All works are by Romare Bearden. © Romare Bearden Foundation/  
Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY

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1. *Profile/Part I, The Twenties: Pittsburgh Memories, Farewell Eugene*, 1978, collage of various papers with paint, ink, graphite, and bleached areas on fiberboard, 16 1/4 x 20 1/2 in. Laura Grosch and Herb Jackson
2. *Now the Dove and the Leopard Wrestle*, 1946, oil on canvas, 23 1/2 x 29 1/4 in. Clements Library, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor
3. *Tomorrow I May Be Far Away*, 1966/1967, collage of various papers with charcoal and graphite on canvas, 46 x 56 in. National Gallery of Art, Washington, Paul Mellon Fund
4. *Watching the Good Trains Go By*, 1964, collage of various papers with ink on cardboard, 13 3/4 x 16 7/8 in. The Collection of Philip J. and Suzanne Schiller, American Social Commentary Art 1930–1970
5. *Madeline Jones' Wonderful Garden*, 1977, collage of various papers with ink, graphite, and surface abrasion on fiberboard, 13 1/2 x 16 in. Frederick L. Brown
6. *Prevalence of Ritual: Conjur Woman*, 1964, collage of various papers with foil, ink, and graphite on cardboard, 9 3/8 x 7 1/4 in. Anonymous lender
7. *Pittsburgh Memories*, 1984, collage of various papers with fabric, foil, paint, ink, color pencil, graphite, and bleached areas on fiberboard, 28 5/8 x 23 1/2 in. Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh; gift of Mr. and Mrs. Ronald R. Davenport and Mr. and Mrs. Milton A. Washington, 1984
8. *The Block II (detail)*, 1972, collage of various papers with foil, paint, ink, graphite, and surface abrasion on seventeen fiberboard and plywood panels including two applied in relief and one recessed, 25 1/2 x 74 in. The Walter O. Evans Collection of African American Art
9. *In a Green Shade (Homage [sic] to Marvell)*, 1984, collage of various papers with paint, ink, and graphite on fiberboard, 39 1/4 x 30 1/4 in. Yvonne and Richard McCracken
10. *The Street*, 1964, photostat on fiberboard, Edition 1/6, 31 x 40 in. Estate of Romare Bearden, courtesy of the Romare Bearden Foundation, New York

11. *Of the Blues: Carolina Shout*, 1974, collage of various papers with paint and surface abrasion on fiberboard, 37<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> x 51 in. Mint Museum of Art, Charlotte, North Carolina, Museum Purchase: National Endowment for the Arts Matching Fund and the Charlotte Debutante Club Fund
12. *Of the Blues: At the Savoy*, 1974, collage of various papers with paint, ink, and graphite on fiberboard, 48 x 36 in. From the Collection of Raymond J. McGuire
13. *Train Whistle Blues: II*, 1964, collage of various papers with paint and graphite on cardboard, 11 x 14<sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub> in. Robert and Faye Davidson, Los Angeles, California
14. *Prevalence of Ritual: Baptism*, 1964, collage of various papers with paint, ink, and graphite on cardboard, 9<sup>1</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 12 in. Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, gift of Joseph H. Hirshhorn, 1966
15. *City Lights*, c. 1970, collage of various papers with ink, graphite, and surface abrasion on fiberboard, 13<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> x 10<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> in. Beverly Zimmerman Private Collection, in memory of Phil Weinberg
16. *Odysseus: Odysseus Enters at the Door Disguised as an Old Man*, c. 1977, watercolor, gouache, and ink over carbon-paper line on paper, 12<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 15<sup>5</sup>/<sub>8</sub> in. Evelyn N. Boulware
17. *Spring Way*, 1964, collage of various papers on cardboard, 6<sup>5</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 9<sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub> in. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Bequest of Henry Ward Ranger through the National Academy of Design
18. *The Blues*, 1975, collage of various papers with paint, ink, and graphite on fiberboard, 24 x 18 in. Honolulu Academy of Arts, gift of Geraldine P. Clark, 1977 (4451.1)
19. *Profile/Part II, The Thirties: Midtown Sunset*, 1981, collage of various papers with paint and bleached areas on fiberboard, 14 x 22 in. Private collection
20. *Rain Forest—Pool*, c. 1978, oil monotype with paint on paper, 23<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 17<sup>5</sup>/<sub>8</sub> in. Private collection, Cambridge, Massachusetts



All works are by Romare Bearden. © Romare Bearden Foundation/  
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*Tomorrow I May Be Far Away*, 1966/1967, collage of various papers with charcoal and graphite on canvas, 46 x 56 in. National Gallery of Art, Washington, Paul Mellon Fund

*Odysseus: Odysseus Enters at the Door Disguised as an Old Man*, c. 1977, watercolor, gouache, and ink over carbon-paper line on paper, 12<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 15<sup>5</sup>/<sub>8</sub> in. Evelyn N. Boulware

*Profile/Part II, The Thirties: Midtown Sunset*, 1981, collage of various papers with paint and bleached areas on fiberboard, 14 x 22 in. Private collection

*Prevalence of Ritual: Baptism*, 1964, collage of various papers with paint, ink, and graphite on cardboard, 9<sup>1</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 12 in. Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, gift of Joseph H. Hirshhorn, 1966

*Of the Blues: At the Savoy*, 1974, collage of various papers with paint, ink, and graphite on fiberboard, 48 x 36 in. From the Collection of Raymond J. McGuire

*Piano Lesson*, 1983, collage of various papers with paint, ink, and graphite on paper, 29 x 22 in. The Walter O. Evans Foundation for Art and Literature

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1. Romare Bearden, *Tomorrow I May Be Far Away*, 1966/1967, collage of various papers with charcoal and graphite on canvas, 46 x 56 in. National Gallery of Art, Washington, Paul Mellon Fund
2. Romare Bearden, *Profile/Part I, The Twenties: Pittsburgh Memories, Farewell Eugene*, 1978, collage of various papers with paint, ink, graphite, and bleached areas on fiberboard, 16<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 20<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> in. Laura Grosch and Herb Jackson
3. Romare Bearden, *Odysseus: Odysseus Enters at the Door Disguised as an Old Man*, c. 1977, watercolor, gouache, and ink over carbon-paper line on paper, 12<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 15<sup>5</sup>/<sub>8</sub> in. Evelyn N. Boulware  
  
with a comparative image by Pintoricchio
4. Romare Bearden, *Prevalence of Ritual: Baptism*, 1964, collage of various papers with paint, ink, and graphite on cardboard, 9<sup>1</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 12 in. Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, gift of Joseph H. Hirshhorn, 1966  
  
with comparative images of African, Renaissance, and modern art
5. Ten images for use with *Activity: Match Bearden's Work with Artistic Models*

**Books and articles by and about Bearden**

The quotations from Romare Bearden that appear in this packet are from the sources cited below.

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Tomkins, Calvin. "Profiles: Romare Bearden, Putting Something over Something Else." *New Yorker* 53 (November 28, 1977): 53–77.

***For young people***

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Giovanni, Nikki. *Shimmy Shimmy Shimmy Like My Sister Kate: Looking at the Harlem Renaissance Through Poems*. New York: Henry Holt, 1996.

Hughes, Langston (with collage by Romare Bearden). *The Block*. New York: Viking, 1995.

Greenberg, Jan. *Romare Bearden: Collage of Memories*. New York: Abrams, 2003.

Hartfield, Claire (illustrated by Jerome Lagarrigue). *Me and Uncle Romie*. New York: Dial, 2002.

Shange, Ntozake (paintings by Romare Bearden). *I Live in Music*. New York: Stewart, Tabori and Chang, 1999.

Weatherford, Carole Boston (illustrated by Eric Velasquez). *The Sound That Jazz Makes*. New York: Walker and Company, 2000.



### Online resources

[www.beardenfoundation.org](http://www.beardenfoundation.org)

Official web site of the Bearden Foundation

[www.edsitement.neh.gov](http://www.edsitement.neh.gov)

Among extensive resources is a program “Learning the Blues”

[www.pbs.org/riverofsong](http://www.pbs.org/riverofsong)

Includes educational materials about the blues along the Mississippi River

[www.pbs.org/jazz/](http://www.pbs.org/jazz/)

Extensive information about jazz from the Ken Burns television series

Includes biographies, audio, and online activities

[www.iaje.org](http://www.iaje.org)

Web site of the International Association for Jazz Education

[www.artsedge.kennedy-center.org](http://www.artsedge.kennedy-center.org)

An education resource for performance and visual arts

[www.loc.gov](http://www.loc.gov)

Memory, a section of the Library of Congress site, includes archived recordings as well as other cultural documents

Division of Education  
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