

The Dove, 1964

The figure of the dove in Romare Bearden's collage perches unobtrusively on a ledge above a busy Harlem, New York, street scene. The artist created the essence of a vibrant, ever changing neighborhood by gluing cut-up photographs, clippings from newspapers and magazines, and colored paper to a piece of cardboard in such a way that the viewer's eye, like an inhabitant of the street itself, is constantly on the move, jumping from light areas to dark areas and from pattern to pattern. We glimpse people with large heads and hands and small feet walking, sitting, smoking, and peering from open doors and windows; we eye cats roaming—perhaps looking for a meal—and spy body parts that emerge mysteriously from undefined openings in the buildings. Amid all this activity it is hard to imagine any sense of order, but Bearden carefully composed *The Dove* so that, beginning with the white cat at bottom left, we travel into and around the street, always noticing something different.

Romare Bearden was born around 1911 in Charlotte, North Carolina, and migrated with his family to Harlem in 1914, where his writer-mother hosted the leaders of the African American artistic and intellectual mainstream at their home. Although Bearden graduated from New York University with a degree in education and made his living as a New York social worker until he was in his mid-fifties, painting was his chosen profession. In 1944, he had his first solo show at a major Washington, D.C., gallery. By the late 1950s, Bearden

was a well-known artist working in an abstract style that incorporated influences from the great masters in the history of art as well as his own memories of African American life in North Carolina, Harlem, and Pittsburgh (where his grandparents lived). Between 1963 and 1964, however, Bearden took an artistic step that would alter the direction of his work and bring him international attention.

The Dove collage was among twenty-one works Bearden made during his involvement with Spiral, an organization of fifteen African American artists formed in July 1963, one month before the historic march on Washington led by Martin Luther King Jr. (see 19-B). The optimistic explanation of the spiral—“because, from a starting point, it moves outward, embracing all directions, yet constantly upward”—symbolized the attitude of the group, which undertook to answer the question “What is black art?” and to investigate the role of the black artist in a climate of segregation. Bearden brought in a few collages and suggested (unsuccessfully) that the group collaborate on a project. In the early 1960s, artists, particularly painters, were reinventing collage (from the French term “to glue”), a technique that had been popular in Europe in the early twentieth century. It is a medium that encourages the freedom to improvise, and Bearden, who loved and composed jazz, incorporated the rhythms and syncopations of that musical style into his collages. Bearden may also have had in mind the tradition of African American patchwork quiltmaking. Although he insisted that his works had no political agenda, the Spiral-inspired collages and the subsequent series of large black-and-white photostats (copier-like images that he named “Projections”) made from them were groundbreaking. Bearden was one of the first artists to depict black popular culture from an African American point of view, and he addressed a wide range of subjects based on his rural and urban experience of black life. Moreover, he did so in a manner that broke up and rearranged mass-produced images in an almost abstract way, creating new relationships and interpretations. On viewing the “Projections,” one critic pointed out that “through the use of optical shifts and arrangements similar to a jigsaw puzzle, [the artworks] cover more ground... than a group of photographs presented in a conventional fashion.” Although *The Dove* was given its title after it was made, it is not difficult to attach a meaning such as hope or peace to the serene bird that appears in the center of urban life, or to see a predatory connection in the white prowling cat, which the bird appears to be watching.

The Dove and the twenty other collages done by Bearden opened up a new direction in his art. He continued to explore the medium of collage until his death, creating works that are, in the words of writer Ralph Ellison, “visual poetry.”



17-B Romare Bearden (c. 1911–1988), *The Dove*, 1964. Cut-and-pasted photoreproductions and papers, gouache, pencil, and colored pencil on cardboard, 13 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 18 $\frac{1}{2}$ in. (34 x 47.6 cm.). Blanchette Rockefeller Fund (377.1971). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Digital Image © The Museum of Modern Art / Licensed by SCALA / Art Resource, New York. Art © Estate of Romare Bearden Trusts / Licensed by VAGA, New York.

TEACHING ACTIVITIES

E = ELEMENTARY | M = MIDDLE | S = SECONDARY

Encourage students to look closely at all the parts of this collage.

teaching activities

DESCRIBE AND ANALYZE **E | M | S**

Ask students to find these elements.

Dove: *It is at the top.*

Black cat: *It is at the center.*

White cat: *It is in the lower left corner.*

E | M | S

Ask students to describe the setting for this scene.

It is a city street. Some students may know this is a Harlem neighborhood in New York City.

What architectural details would you see on a city street?

Complicated but weathered wooden moldings surround the doors and windows; there are steps, and grids on some windows. The fire escape has a wrought iron railing.

E | M | S

Where did Bearden repeat textures in the shape of brick?

He repeated these textures above the street, in the upper half of the composition.

What do these brick textures represent?

They represent walls of brick (tenement) buildings.

E | M | S

Bearden rearranges pieces of magazine and newspaper images to create new messages. Locate a figure. What is this figure doing? Find people looking out windows, sitting on steps, and walking on the street.

Most of the figures are composed of more than one cut-out. In the center a man holding a cigarette sits on steps. Another man, wearing a white hat low over his eyes, walks down the sidewalk. To the left of the black cat, a woman leans on her elbows and looks out a basement window.

M | S

Ask the students to consider how we perceive our environment. For example, when we're sitting in a room or walking down the street, do we see everything at once in equal detail?

We see the scene in fragments.

How is Bearden's collage like the way we take in a scene in real life?

We see a complicated or active scene piece by piece over time.

INTERPRET **M | S**

Bearden grew up in New York City during the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s, and he loved jazz. How is his collage like jazz?

Both encourage the artist to improvise and try new arrangements. The fragmented style is like the upbeat syncopation of jazz rhythms, which opens up a musical composition.

M | S

Describe the mood and energy of this scene.

It is bustling, everything is close and crowded; people are walking and milling about, watching and being watched; and it seems that there would be lots of sound.

M | S

Bearden wanted to show African American life in America from an African American point of view. Ask students to explain how well they think he accomplishes that in this collage.

CONNECTIONS **Historical Connections:** Black history; the Great Migration; Harlem Renaissance; civil rights movement

Historical Figures: Zora Neal Hurston; Langston Hughes; Jean Toomer; Richard Wright; Martin Luther King Jr.

Geography: urban geography; human geography

Literary Connections and Primary Documents: *If Only I Had a Horn:* Young Louis Armstrong, Roxane Orgill (elementary); *Duke Ellington: The Piano Prince and His Orchestra*, Andrea Davis Pinkney (elementary); *Sweet Music in Harlem*, Debbie A. Taylor (elementary); *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Zora Neal

Hurston (secondary); *Cane*, Jean Toomer (secondary)

Music: jazz; blues

Arts: collage; mixed media